

Phantasms of Interpretation:
Raphaëlle de Groot's *Portraits de clients*

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2011

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School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

Phantasms of Interpretation:

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Portraits de clients (2007) is the title of a performative intervention presented by Raphaëlle de Groot (b. 1974) inside a disused bank building in downtown Ottawa. In this work, de Groot invited visitors to engage with her in the creation of “blind” collaborative portraits of past clients of the bank. Building on my experience of this work, this thesis examines *Portraits de clients* in relation to its immediate critical and artistic context. A series of entries analyzing the intervention's relational procedures and somatic effects, as well as its complex relation to its institutional context, serve to bring the most important features of the work into relief.

This thesis also queries the stakes involved when one's *attachment* to an object—here, a Polaroid portrait produced as part of de Groot's intervention—becomes a key factor in art historical learning and research. Against this backdrop, discussions of the photographic *punctum* and the phantasm, of the fetish and the souvenir, of “un-mastery” and representational transformation, expand current conceptions of the artist's *oeuvre*, while opening new avenues for thinking about interpretative desire and critical intent.

As the attached subject in question, I draw on W. J. T. Mitchell's notion of the “metapicture” and Michael Ann Holly's idea of “prefiguration” to consider de Groot's employment of ethnographic and participatory artistic methods. Finding these theoretical approaches to be at once useful and restrictive, I argue for an understanding of *Portraits de clients* as a vantage point from which to consider the current convergence of artistic and scholarly modes of research.

Acknowledgements

Many people have helped at various stages in the preparation of this thesis. First of all, I thank my family—my parents, Javier Rodriguez and Susana Alvarez, and my siblings, Diego, Paulina, Santiago, and Alonso—for their support. In the Department of Art History, the administrative help of Anna Waclawek and Dina Vescio has been exceptional. I also thank the Graduate Program Directors, Catherine MacKenzie and Johanne Sloan: the former for welcoming me to the department with grace, and the latter for seeing me out of it unscathed. An independent study with Michèle Thériault, and graduate seminars with Martha Langford, Kristina Huneault, Alice Ming Wai Jim, Cynthia Hammond, and Sherry Farrell Racette provided fundamental tools for thinking critically about this project. At the University of Essex, Margaret Iversen and Neil Cox offered precious guidance and a different perspective, for which I am grateful. My colleagues in study and in play, Robin Simpson, Nicole Burisch, Aurèle Parisien, Jennifer Roberts, Kathryn Simpson, Sharon Murray, Zoë Tousignant, Philippe Guillaume, Erin Silver, Mark Clintberg, Corina Ilea, Elizabeth Cavaliere, and Luke Nicholson have all left their indelible marks. Adam Bobbette, Richard Cassidy, Nasrin Himada, Daniela Ansovini, Christophe Jivraj, Noeli D'Ostie-Racine, and Christy Thompson (among many others) also weathered with me the ups and downs of this adventure. I am especially indebted to Heather Davis, in whose vibrant presence many of these ideas were cultivated, debated, buried, resurrected, and hashed out. My second reader, Kristina Huneault, has gone well beyond the call of duty with her comments on the final draft: a sincere thank you. But I reserve my deepest gratitude for Martha Langford, whose support as my thesis advisor has been unwavering from the start. A vigilant editor, instructor, and guide, Dr. Langford has helped to transform this thesis into a true learning process. Her example is steadfast, and it is nothing short of contagious. Finally, I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (CGS and CGS-Michael Smith foreign study supplement) as well as the Fondation J. A. de Sève for their financial support of this project.

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Portrait of Raphaëlle de Groot wearing Dwayne R. mask, produced as part of the intervention *Portraits de clients*, 2007. Instant dye print (*Polaroid*). 10.8 x 8.8 cm; image: 7.9 x 7.8 cm.

Preface

And in this final solitude to which he no longer comes, I console myself by thinking that perhaps he is going to write a story about us, that, believing he's making up a story, he's going to write all this about axolotls.

— Julio Cortázar, “Axolotl”

Two complementary objectives have motivated this thesis. First, I want to share my account of *Portraits de clients* (2007), a relatively unknown performative intervention by Raphaëlle de Groot. Specifically, I am interested in examining whether and how *Portraits de clients* took up the concerns that were motivating de Groot’s artistic practice around this time—key among them being the artist’s preoccupation with the figure of the artist, as well as with the social and corporeal rituals associated with visiting art galleries and museums. This type of approach closes the circle on the work by evaluating it according to its own criteria within firmly established critical and historical boundaries.

Part of pursuing this more circumscribed objective, however, involved acknowledging how it tends to leave out one’s fluid experience of the work. My interest in *Portraits de clients* grew from my direct participation in the project and the attachment that formed in its wake. This experience raised the question of the work’s historicity—of my proximity to and distance from the intervention; of what counts, and according to whom, when the work becomes an object of art historical inquiry. The

nature of this inquiry is also a factor. I am engaged in a learning-process: the writing of a Master's thesis. What if, rather than suppressing these factors—my incidental role in *Portraits de clients*; my lasting, if sometimes fickle, attachment to its product; my pursuit of a Master's degree in Art History—what if I were to acknowledge these motivating factors plainly at the threshold of this study? Addressing myself to this *what if*, in its many conditions and dimensions, forms the second objective of my research.

What intrigues me is not the intellectual pedigree, or even the form of this question. Rather, it is the way in which *Portraits de clients* appears to rehearse my quest for knowledge and academic expertise from the moment it passes into the domain of criticism and art history.

Biographical Notes

Raphaëlle de Groot was born in 1974 in Montreal. She received her Bachelor's degree in visual art from Université du Québec à Montréal in 1997. Her first recorded work—an untitled action in which she used latex to collect dust and other particles from an abandoned public bath—preceded her graduation from this program by a year.¹ From 2004 to 2007 de Groot undertook a Master's in visual and media arts, also at UQÀM. The important exhibition, *Raphaëlle de Groot. En exercice*, which surveyed the preceding ten years of the artist's work, was organized and presented while she was still a student in the MFA program.

De Groot began her artistic career in the mid 1990s, a time that roughly corresponds with the blossoming of “relational” and other modes of *in situ* and participatory art practice in Quebec. Within this context, de Groot's work has been recognized for its strategies of immersion and collecting, for its handling of intersubjective experience, as well as for its quarrying of the figure and subjectivity of the artist as a site of transformation.²

De Groot's earliest projects often took the form of actions or interventions, during which the artist would collect and patiently reorganize overlooked traces of human activity. The trace is a key concept and process for de Groot. As Anne-Marie Ninacs

¹ See Raphaëlle de Groot, “Du bain,” in *Bain public, événement et colloque sur le lieu en art actuel* (Montreal, 1996).

² This aspect of de Groot's work has been discussed by Louise Déry “The Exhibition as Exercise/L'exposition mise en exercice,” in *Raphaëlle de Groot: En exercice*, ed. Louise Déry (Montreal: Galerie de l'UQÀM); Véronique Leblanc, “La relation comme espace de négociation entre soi et l'autre: études des pratiques relationnelles” (MA thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2009), accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/QMUQ/TC-QMUQ-2686.pdf>; and Atelier Graff, “Raphaëlle de Groot, Lauréate du Prix Graff 2011,” news release, May 13, 2011.

has observed, these works tried to bring the viewer into contact with what is invisible; not to make visible what is invisible, but rather to express the status of invisibility as such.³ Significantly, these works tended to be situated in contexts that are on the margins or sometimes well outside the established boundaries of the art world: de Groot has conducted extended projects with nuns in a Montreal parish museum (*Dévoilements*, 1998-2001), with a group of seeing-impaired people (*Colin-maillard*, 1999-2001), with members of the Association des aides familiales du Québec (*Plus que parfaites. Chroniques du travail en maison privée 1920-2000*, 1999-2001), and with workers at a textile factory (*8 x 5 x 363 + 1*, 2002-2006).

Artist residencies, exhibitions, commissions, and other opportunities for collaboration play important roles in de Groot's works. Like other artists of her generation, she has developed ways of working that adapt to whatever facilities, materials, budgets, and opportunities are offered by representatives of the host institutions.

Since the early 2000s, de Groot has also produced a number of performative actions and interventions. These works—which include *Exercice filmé 1* (2002), *L'Histoire illustrée* (2003-2004), *Drawing Session* (2004), *Essais performatifs* (2005), *En exercice* (2006), and *Portraits de clients* (2007)—adopted procedures that turn “attention back to the artist's work, to the artist grappling with the creative process.”⁴ (I discuss a number of these works in the Appendix). In these projects, the artist often

³ Anne-Marie Ninacs, “Raphaëlle de Groot,” in *Point de chute*, ed. Louise Déry and Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Galerie de l'UQÀM, 2001), n. p.

⁴ Raphaëlle de Groot, “Statement,” Raphaëlle de Groot (artist's website), accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.raphaelledegroot.net/>.

placed herself strategically in the vicinity of other art objects, in locations associated with the art world.

De Groot's performative gestures also draw attention to the overlooked trace—for instance, through her experiments with drawing—and they consistently allude critically to practices of collecting and display. However, unlike her collecting gestures, which tend to take place, at least in part, in public or semi-public urban spaces, de Groot's performances engage with the social relationships fostered inside the gallery and the museum. Within these protectorates, her works tend to bring to the foreground the artist's preoccupation with struggle and the engagement with gallery visitors.

* * *

I (Pablo Rodriguez) was born in Mexico City in 1981. I received a first Bachelor's degree from McGill University (1999-2004), specializing in English (Cultural Studies) and International Development Studies. It was in the final year of this degree that I was initially exposed to the academic fields of photography studies and art history. Spurred on by these courses, which dovetailed with a growing interest in photographic practice, I enrolled in the Photography program at Concordia University (BFA, 2004-2008). This program, and the relations cultivated with the staff and students associated with it, forced me to yoke my interest in photographic theory to the experiential and institutional conditions of art-making. My final project—a hybrid installation of staged photographs, text, and objects—narrated a fictional artist's attempt to excavate an investigator's disappearance (*Lol Sophie O'Riley, or the Disappearance of Cedric Klapsitch*, Galerie Art Mûr, 2007).

During this time I continued to develop my skills as a writer. Opportunities in arts research—in the form of the Ann Duncan Award for the Visual Arts (2006)—and art

journalism—the Canadian Art Editorial Residency (2007)—rendered my relation to art-making more complex. This atmosphere of personal and professional uncertainty had not waned when, on a day-trip to Ottawa to see art exhibitions, I came face-to-face for the first time with Raphaëlle de Groot's work.

In retrospect, my experience of *Portraits de clients* appears to have been an important turning point in this trajectory. In 2008-2009 a number of events, one of them being my experience of *Portraits de clients*, led to my enrolment in the Master's in Art History program at Concordia University (which I began in 2009). From the beginning, my desire to write about Raphaëlle de Groot's work was warmly embraced by my academic advisor, Martha Langford, and by the Graduate Program Director, Catherine MacKenzie. Funding and travel grants obtained from the University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council further encouraged and facilitated my objectives. From January to June 2010, I pursued a period of study abroad at the University of Essex under the supervision of Margaret Iversen.

In spite of these supports, I also found myself cast into what, for me, felt like foreign disciplinary territory. My experience of Raphaëlle de Groot's work subsequently became coupled with new experiences and professional relationships, transforming it, in a sense, into a potential engine for learning. *Portraits de clients* became, in other words, a useful if unwieldy plotting instrument in my passage through Art History.

Entries

1. *Portraits de clients* (2007)

Portraits de clients was presented as part of the collective exhibition *Making Real/Rendre réel*, organized by Montreal-based art historian and independent curator Marie Fraser inside a disused bank building on the Sparks Street mall in downtown Ottawa. *Making Real/Rendre réel* included work by thirteen contemporary artists and artist-groups from Quebec, each invited to create or adapt a work to this particular venue.⁵ Part work-site, part stage-set, *Portraits de clients* was installed close to the entrance of the building. De Groot was present during the building's opening hours for the extent of the fourteen-day exhibition. A long line of counters separated her station from the traffic of the main atrium; leftover furniture from the bank, these counters created a makeshift border that facilitated viewing from a distance, while encouraging more intimate ways of engaging with the work.

Visitors to the exhibition would encounter de Groot immersed in her work or lingering near her station, possibly chatting with other visitors (in de Groot's practice, even these contingent exchanges count as part of the artistic production of the work). In the case of *Portraits de clients*, what de Groot proposed was ostensibly an exercise in "blind" and collaborative drawing, based on a set of ID cards she had found abandoned on the site. After an informal explanation of the activity, and a short briefing on how to operate the Polaroid camera, visitors willing to participate began by selecting an ID card

⁵ *Making Real/Rendre réel* was held from April 20 to May 5, 2007. The other artists included in the exhibition were: Jean-Pierre Aubé, BGL, Mathieu Beauséjour, Patrick Bérubé, Geneviève Cadieux, Pascal Grandmaison, Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Nadia Myre, Alain Paiement, Yannick Pouliot, Jocelyn Robert, and Ève K. Tremblay. There was no catalogue produced for the exhibition.

from a pile that had been set out upon a table. Participants could take their time to peruse the identities on offer (I recall wanting to choose at random, but a feature of Dwayne R.'s profile—his profession—caught my eye and I settled on “him” instead). The ID cards were in reality index cards of a conventional size, about 13 cm by 18 cm; they were faintly gridded (as opposed to lined) and contained a mix of typeset and handwritten elements. Each card listed the name, age, height, weight, hair colour, eye colour, and occupation of a given client—“all real information,” de Groot insists, “found among papers abandoned on the site.”⁶

Visitors proceeded by conjuring up an image of the client on the basis of this administrative record and then dictating it to de Groot. The artist, having placed a foil-backed piece of paper over her face, tried to implement their instructions by drawing on the surface of this mask. These constraints simultaneously called for verbal communication and underlined its limitations: participants tried to instruct de Groot, only to hear de Groot through the mask asking for more specific directions. I found myself caught up in the minutia of the back-and-forth (between myself and another, between what was seen and what was said or heard) that aimed at approximation. The drawing exercise also forced visitors to supplement the cards with the volatile contents of their own memory and imagination, just as it scrambled de Groot's habitual frames of reference. The following comment by the artist is indicative of the work's relational objectives:

Surtout, ce qui m'intéressait, c'était de travailler toujours dans une difficulté. ... Et vraiment de partager ce moment, parce que quand la

⁶ De Groot, “Portraits de clients,” Raphaëlle de Groot (artist's website), accessed September 12, 2011.

personne qui s'assoyait avec moi se trouvait elle aussi en déficit. Donc moi, je ne voyais pas, mais la personne avait cette difficulté à décrire un visage. ... On travaillait tous les deux dans cette situation de manque, comme en déficit, par rapport à l'image d'un visage.⁷

This feeling of coming up short and of mutual effort was augmented by the defamiliarizing perceptual effects of the exercise—in other words, by what de Groot looked like when she was wearing the mask while attempting to draw at the same time. As de Groot herself has commented, in these moments “ma personne s'éclipse et devient objet.”⁸ *Portraits de clients* thus framed the activity of making a portrait as a conduit for a humorous, absorbing, and perplexing social encounter—an encounter that was repeated dozens of times by de Groot over the course of the exhibition and by each visitor-participant, just once.

After the drawing was finished, the visitor chose a wig to cap off the creation. These wigs were created by the artist especially for the occasion; they were placed on a table close to the drawing station, so that one had to lead the masked and sightless artist to the spot. After selecting the wig the visitor would watch as she placed it on her head according to his or her directions. De Groot's partner-spectator then led her to a wall nearby to snap two Polaroid SX-70 photographs. This photographic process, much employed by artists and scientists from its introduction to the market in 1948 to the start

⁷ “Entrevue avec Raphaëlle de Groot,” Youtube video, 4: 48, discusses an installation presented by the artist at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal during the Triennale québécoise, from May 24 to September 7, 2008, posted by “MACM videos,” August 14, 2008, and accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RACcUolkWhU>.

⁸ R. de Groot, “En Exercice: Mise à l'épreuve de la figure de l'artiste dans un contexte d'exposition à travers une pratique interactive de la performance” (MFA thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2006), 25.

of its withdrawal in 2007, produced a square colour image 7.9 cm by 7.8 cm in size, that printed out in daylight, encased by a bright white mat. Each image was unique; the process produced no negative or image file. The camera was equipped with a flash, which heightened the sheen of the paper mask and contoured the figure in shadow. When it came to taking the photograph, some participants asked the artist to strike a pose that resembled the identity of the imagined client, while others, like myself, decided simply to frame the scene in a portrait format before snapping the shutter.

Then came the gift. De Groot gave to the visitor the Polaroid of his or her choosing, incorporating the other into an evolving on-site installation that also included the eccentrically fashioned masks. Presented face up on a separate counter inside de Groot's station, and arranged in a manner suggesting a collection, de Groot's Polaroids, combined with the masks and with the artist's presence on site, seemed to serve the didactic purpose of instructing her visitors on the sort of activity that the intervention involved. The display narrated what the individual objects indexed: the temporal and participatory aspects of the intervention.

De Groot also captioned the photographs. At the base of the image—on the surface of the 'pod' that had contained the chemicals—she inscribed some basic details about the bank client, followed by a by-line attributing the portrait to the visitor. She did this for both pictures (the one that she presented, and the one she offered to visitors). In addition, the back of my picture (and I presume, also, the backs of the others) bears the artist's signature.

Portraits de clients thus integrated a mix of *in situ*, performative, and participatory techniques. In this sense, it was very similar to de Groot's earlier

performative videos and interventions, works such as *Exercice filmé 1*, the *Essais performatifs*, and *En exercice*. Formally, *Portraits de clients* seemed to point to a range of social (artistic and non-artistic) scenarios preoccupied with depiction, with listening, and with the slippery relation of words to images. Robert Morris's *Blind Time* (1973-2000) series of drawings, as well as Suzy Lake's early video piece, *The Natural Way to Draw* (1975), come to mind here.⁹ The function of language in forensic portraiture—i.e., the practice of producing pictures of absent individuals using verbal or biometric information, as in the tradition of Alphonse Berthillon's *portrait parlé*—might be another point of comparison, reminding us of de Groot's handling of forensic technologies and procedures in her earlier works.¹⁰ It is just as important, however, to acknowledge that the artistry of *Portraits de clients* resided in the way that the intervention manipulated social conventions, and in the more licit forms of experience that were its results: a space of encounter between self and other, feelings of co-presence and negotiation, and so forth. In this respect, *Portraits de clients* can be compared to more recent participatory gestures that index the fleeting social encounters

⁹ Jean-Pierre Criqui, ed., *Robert Morris: Blind Time Drawings 1973-2000* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005); Martha Hanna, ed., *Suzy Lake: Point of Reference* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1993). An early description of Lake's *The Natural Way to Draw* appears in the catalogue *Québec 75* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1975), 28.

¹⁰ The technique of the *portrait parlé* was devised as a means of translating visual information from police portraits onto identity cards comprising verbal and numerical information. As Alan Sekula explains, the *portrait parlé* was "an attempt to overcome the inadequacies of a purely visual empiricism" in contexts of bureaucratic classification. *Portraits de clients* inverts this relation, turning the ID cards into a springboard for a picture, and thereby purposefully exacerbating the gap between words and images that Bertillonage sought to close. Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter, 1986): 30. Bernard Lamarche discusses de Groot's laborious use of forensic procedures in "La culture de la bibliothèque. Intervenir dans les classifications et jouer de la collection," *Le Devoir*, February 6, 1999.

which they insert themselves into and construct: the sculptural forms and organic remains of Massimo Guerrera's *Darboral* (begun in 2000), Devora Neumark's crocheting in *Présence* (1997), and the drawn marks in Sylvie Cotton's *Ton corps mon atelier: taches de naissance* (2004) all serve a similar function as the index cards, the Polaroids, and the masks in *Portraits de clients*.¹¹

Like many of de Groot's interventions, *Portraits de clients* has an extended institutional footprint. She reprised the gesture of *Portraits de clients* in the same year, in a work titled *Il volto interiore* (2007), which was produced for a commercial gallery in Rome, Italy. The site, in this case, was different, so de Groot proceeded by inviting gallery visitors to make an appointment "to do a portrait with me of a person of their choice."¹² As part of this work she also produced, on her own, portraits based on her memories of her encounters. The following year de Groot exhibited elements from both *Portraits de clients* and *Il volto interiore* at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal as part of the installation *Tous ces visages* (2007-2008). In 2007, de Groot also created *Casting* (2007-2008), another installation, composed this time entirely of elements related to *Portraits de clients*. *Tous ces visages* divided the viewer's attention between de Groot's memory drawings and the masks, which were arranged face up, one on top of the other, in a manner that suggested the layering of memory. *Casting*, by contrast,

¹¹ Anne-Marie Ninacs, ed., *Massimo Guerrera: Darboral: ici, maintenant, avec l'impermanence des nos restes* (Quebec: Musée du Québec, 2002); the details of Neumark's *Présence* appear in the online catalogue, "Sur l'expérience de la ville: interventions en milieu urbain de Montréal," Optica, un centre d'art contemporain, accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/k31320/optica.htm>. A description of Cotton's *Ton corps mon atelier*, is available on the artist's website, accessed September 12, 2011, http://www.sylviecotton.com/projets/aH8weo4zKr3yF1ab7j_TIN

¹² De Groot, "Il volto interiore," Raphaëlle de Groot (artist's website), accessed September 12, 2011.

presented none of the masks and was organized instead around the twin axes of the found identity documents and visual documentation from the action. In spite of such differences, however, both of these later installations display de Groot's continuing interest in producing 'readings' of what was collected during a previous *in situ* intervention. This is emblemized by the audio recordings that de Groot presented on these two occasions. Created for important survey-style collective exhibitions (The Sobey Art Awards and the Quebec Triennale respectively), *Casting* and *Tous ces visages* also indicate de Groot's stature in the Quebec and Canadian art scene.

However, in spite of this institutional footprint, the critical bibliography on *Portraits de clients* remains slim compared to de Groot's other works: *Dévoilements*, *8 x 5 x 363 + 1*, and *En exercice*. Moreover, when *Portraits de clients* is discussed, it is in the context of the later projects (*Il volto interiore*, *Tous ces visages*, and *Casting*). This places *Portraits de clients* among de Groot's less remarked performances and interventions, suggesting that—at least evaluatively—it exists more under the sign of forgetting than remembering. To adapt a phrase of Michael Camille's (written in a different context): what may be most important about *Portraits de clients* "is the fact that [it] is not important—at least in terms [of art criticism] and the History of Art."¹³

Nevertheless it is important to me, since I opted to participate in de Groot's exercise, describing to her a client named Dwayne R. . Something that drew my attention to this person was his profession (though in retrospect I would say that it was also other things, such as his gender): glancing at the card, I noticed that Dwayne R.

¹³ Camille, *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remiet, Illuminator* (Yale University Press, 1996), 3. The actual phrase reads: "What is most important about that person who forms the subject of this book is the fact that he is not important—at least in terms of the History of Art."

had been an employee at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; I was thinking of applying for an internship at an art magazine at that time, and figured that that was as good a reason as any to choose Dwayne R., and so I did. (When faced with a choice like that, it can be hard not to measure oneself against that which one is considering choosing—*Portraits de clients* capitalized on that.)

De Groot placed the mask over her face, and we sat in front of each other at about an arm's distance. In some moments I felt that the exercise put me on display as much as it did the artist. At other moments, these feelings subsided and were replaced by the particular demands of our activity. The portrait was half-made (there was already a suggestion of a face) when all of a sudden I sensed a phantasm appearing on the horizon of my perception. It arrived clad in de Groot's voice (in those moments it was "it," and no longer "she," that asked me for directions), and it also inhered in certain articulations of her neck, arms, and torso. But it did not itself move or speak. Motionless and silent, it flickered, moving into and out of existence, until the end of the exercise.

Perplexed, I continued talking with de Groot, but my mind had already started wandering, trying to find elements in the immediate context that might explain the whys and hows of this apparition. What was this "it," anyway? Was it supposed to be the client (in other words, a kind of ghostly figure, a resurrection)? Perhaps. I was uncertain. Nothing I could think of seemed to stick, and nothing about the setting, or in de Groot's tone of voice or disposition, suggested that she intended for this apparition to emerge. The phantasm had its origin in me, but at the same time it was outside of me. Or alternatively, it was neither in me, nor in the work, but in the space between.

2. *Cette impression de vie*

Incorporeal: to me, it was as if de Groot, in those brief moments, had become ground to the client-phantasm's figure. That's what was so unsettling about her use of the mask: she was eclipsed, taken over in one sense, but not really in another. Nevertheless, the phantasm (or my experience of it) had a specific kind of duration—a duration that Tzvetan Todorov has associated with the experience of the fantastic. The fantastic, Todorov writes, “occupies the duration of this uncertainty. ... [It is] that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.”¹⁴ This is one way of describing the kind of bind that *Portraits de clients* temporarily put me into. Of course this effect wasn't unique to *Portraits de clients*—any performative action in which de Groot covers her face like this can potentially expose the viewer to that feeling of uncertainty. But the figure of the client provided a special conduit (the quest for identification) that increased the significance of the experience.

I remember not having a name for it, hesitating about whether to trace this effect to the client (and hence to the supernatural), to myself (a garden-variety trip-up of the senses), or to de Groot (an artistic ‘effect,’ like a colour effect in painting). De Groot's attitude did not suggest any particular intention, though in retrospect it is evident that the exercise was set up to prompt that sort of experience from spectators. Her videotaped exercises apparently worked on their maker in a similar way: they gave her pause. Commenting on *Exercice filmé I*, de Groot has said that the exercise “created a

¹⁴ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 25.

distance that positions me as a ‘subject-object.’ Then a sculptural character appears who, although built around my head and by my gestures, seems alien to my person.”¹⁵

The index cards and the invitation to imagine a portrait served to fix the attention and identification of the visitors—they were obvious pretexts in this way. But the physical constraints and the phantasm turned that nearness around, exposing visitors to a corresponding element of deterritorialization and *dépaysement*.¹⁶ In the case of *Portraits de clients*, this sort of aesthetic disturbance suggests a concerted attempt on the part of the artist to intervene in visitors’ habits of perception, especially those cultivated by the social rituals associated with visiting the modern art museum. Following Carol Duncan, one can think of these rituals in terms of the embodied articulation of a set of skills, whose proper (or improper) performance—say, in the site of exhibition—symbolically confirms one’s inclusion in (or exclusion from) this particular configuration of the cultural field. Such rituals may include the practice of silent and attentive looking; stopping to contemplate (or to actively participate with) the appropriate cultural objects (or prepared situations); imagining oneself in a scenario of learning, exposure to the past, or exposure merely to ‘something different’ in the

¹⁵ Cited in Louise Déry, “The Exhibition as Exercise,” 36.

¹⁶ *Dépaysement* is a word frequently used by de Groot to describe the motivations underpinning her artistic gestures. “S’excentrer, se placer en marge, vivre la différence, vivre l’autre. Ce besoin constant de dépaysement ... m’a amenée à travailler en dehors des lieux traditionnels de l’art.” In de Groot, “L’autre comme contrée à explorer: Dévoilements et Colin-maillard,” in *Les commenseaux: Quand l’art se fait circonstances/When Art Becomes Circumstance*, ed. Patrice Loubier and Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Skol centre d’arts actuels, 2001), 123. Mieke Bleyen and Hilder van Gelder indicate that *dépaysement* was a term used strategically by the (Belgian) surrealist Paul Nougé in his writing; for Nougé, the term meant a displacement prompted by a “disturbing situation.” See Bleyen and van Gelder, “The (De)Construction of National Photography in Minor Photographies: The Case of Marcel Mariën,” *History of Photography* 35: 2 (2011), 119n31.

present; and of imagining others (be they the artists, other visitors, or an entire group of people) on the basis of this frame.¹⁷

That would be one way of exploring the question raised by the phantasm of *Portraits de clients*—its function as a distancing effect (a playing upon and prying open of our spectatorial expectations). Yet my own impression of this phenomenon was also more “personal,” and, for reasons that I hope to make clear, I’ve insisted on remaining faithful to that dimension of the work as well. Sitting in front of de Groot, trying to imagine what the client looked like, it was impossible not to start thinking about the faces of people I remembered. So when I sensed that sculptural character emerging—when I sensed that the still unfinished portrait was speaking to me—I was touched. In the end the exercise was *not* about the client in any substantive way. It was more about what it felt like to be yoked to what Mieke Bal has categorized as “a form of abandon,” by which she means the capacity of a cultural artifact to indicate, beyond the intentions of its maker, that artifact’s susceptibility to change and transformation over time. De Groot’s errant tracings are, for me, this condition’s aptest metaphor.¹⁸

This form of abandon was as much in the words—mental associations spontaneously triggered by the traits listed on the ID cards—as in the thing-like bodies and body-like things of the exercise. Consider de Groot’s description of herself as a “subject-object,” and of the participant’s comical hand gesturing for someone who

¹⁷ Carol Duncan draws on Victor Turner’s theorization of liminality to describe the modern art museum as a place where modern subjects go in order to have an out-of-the-ordinary aesthetic experience. Applied to de Groot’s work, this might suggest that her play with sensation in the gallery is more equivocal, engaging with the rituals of the museum in a manner that oscillates between complicity and distantiation. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁸ Mieke Bal uses this phrase, “forms of abandon,” in “Intention,” in *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 239-245.

could not see. I saw others doing this, and realized that I had done it too. We appeared as automata of sorts.¹⁹ But what most caught my attention during the exercise was the feeling that, no matter how hard I tried, the activity could only ever result in a roguish materialization of my own projections, and never of the person I was trying to imagine or depict. The somatic effect quickly resolved for me into a kind of reality-check, and it was cut with a feeling akin to mourning. Yet these feelings, however mixed, did not square with the intensity and indeterminacy of that initial sensory impression. “Tout à coup,” Jarry writes, “*il y a cette impression de vie.*”²⁰ It was this play between a lacerating reality and this strange but intense impression that intrigued me, and still does.

No sooner had I received the Polaroid portrait than I proceeded to tuck it carefully away (between the pages of one of the books I was carrying). For safekeeping, but also to mark the occasion, and to remind myself in future of the significance of this curious event. In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart recounts how the closing pitch of the freak show often gave circus performers the chance to peddle wares as souvenirs of their spectacular event. I can say, with Stewart, that what motivated me to pocket the picture in the first place was a desire to distinguish this experience from the others of that day. Stewart writes, “we do not desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather, we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of

¹⁹ This is something that is foregrounded in the video documentation of the exercise, which can be viewed on the “Portraits de clients” page of the artist’s website.

²⁰ Johanne Jarry, “Tous ces visages,” in Raphaëlle de Groot (artist’s website), accessed September 12, 2011, www.raphaelledegroot.net/testi_pdf/testo_johanne.pdf. Also available in the exhibition catalogue, *Il volto interiore* (Rome: Z20 Galleria – Sara Zanin, 2008).

narrative.’²¹ This may explain why I have held on to my Polaroid for so long and also worried when I temporarily misplaced it: it prompts me to tell and tell again the story of a past event in which I experienced something I could not explain.

From very early on, then, my appreciation of *Portraits de clients* depended on the Polaroid’s functioning as a souvenir in the afterlife of the intervention. Could one say that it exchanged one keepsake (the index card) for another (the portrait)? It would be hard to argue for this, since de Groot’s index cards never really functioned as keepsakes, but a certain resonance between the material system of the index cards and institutional uses of the Polaroids is hard to ignore.

3. The phantasm

In common parlance, “phantasm” can mean an illusory perception and a deceptive appearance. It can also mean a spectre, as in a ghost. The art historian Michael Camille has commented on the significance of this term in Plato’s philosophy. He points out how, for Plato, the “making of semblances (‘phantasms’)” implied not only a labour of imitation but also the positioning of individual beholders. “Whereas the icon is ‘other but like,’ the phantasm only appears to look like the thing it copies because of the ‘place’ from which we view it.”²² Camille is interested in Plato’s conception of the

²¹ Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John’s Hopkin’s University Press, 1984), 135.

²² Camille, “Simulacrum,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 36. Brian Massumi offers an engaging account of Deleuze’s stance regarding phantasmatic simulacra in “Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari,” *Copyright* 1 (1987), http://www.anu.edu.au/hrc/first_and_last/works/realer.htm (accessed September 12, 2011).

phantasm in part because it served as the basis for the “overturning of Platonism” undertaken by French theorists in the 1960s and 1970s.

These theorists—Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault among them—argued persuasively that Plato’s distinctions between essence and appearance, original and copy, good copies and bad copies, were no longer philosophically tenable. Their ideas happened to converge with similar critiques in the domain of the visual arts, so that, by the 1980s, art critics such as Rosalind Krauss could theorize photography as the medium most emblematic of this process of levelling.²³ As Camille observes in reference to Deleuze, “the ‘point of view,’ which was at the very fulcrum of Plato’s construction of the phantasmatic simulacra ... is here displaced.”²⁴ Though it is no doubt conditioned by critical postmodernism, *Portraits de clients*’s truck with the phantasm has less to do with ideas of reproducibility than with the affective tone of illusory perceptions. Deleuze challenged Plato on this count, arguing that phantasms are neither facts nor putative things, but utterly real *effects*. He equated phantasms with incorporeal entities, with events. Of these event-like entities, he wrote that “we cannot say that they exist, but that they subsist or inhere (having the minimum of being which is appropriate to that which is not a thing ...).”²⁵ The somatic effects of *Portraits de clients* appear to occupy this register: they are incorporeal, but they nevertheless have an agency that is effective in so far as it is affective.

²³ Krauss, “Photography and the Simulacrum,” *October* 31 (Winter 1984); Douglas Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” *October* 15 (Winter 1980); Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring, 1980); Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2,” *October* 13 (Summer, 1980).

²⁴ Camille, “Simulacrum,” 37.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 5.

“Phantasm” can also allude to the psychoanalytic concept of phantasy (*fantasme* in French), and Deleuze was well aware of that. As a technical term in this context, ‘phantasy’ denotes a variety of things. To paraphrase psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, whom Deleuze cites in his discussion of this phenomenon, phantasy can refer to the expression of those conscious, subliminal, or unconscious processes that texture an individual’s psychic life.²⁶ According to Laplanche and Pontalis, phantasy also has a complex relation to the forces of wish-fulfillment and desire. “The primary function of phantasy,” they write, is “the mise-en-scène of desire—a mise-en-scène in which what is prohibited (*l’interdit*) is always present in the actual formation of the wish.”²⁷ Moreover Laplanche and Pontalis insist that, strictly speaking, phantasies cannot be reduced to the subject’s intentions:

Even where they can be summed up in a single sentence, phantasies are still scripts (*scénarios*) of organised scenes which are capable of dramatisation—usually in a visual form. ... It is not an object that the subject imagines and aims at, so to speak, but rather a sequence in which the subject has his own part to play and in which permutations of roles and attributions are possible.²⁸

²⁶ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 318. The technical definition of phantasy is, of course, much more complex. Laplanche and Pontalis, for instance, explain the nuanced relationships between conscious and subliminal phantasies (such as daydreams), on one hand, and unconscious, or primal phantasy on the other (as it is expressed in the Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex). Whereas phantasy in daydreams is meant to screen an unconscious desire or wish, contributing to the defense of the subject’s self, unconscious phantasy puts that very self in play; what Laplanche and Pontalis draw attention to is the porous and slippery relationship between these different registers in Freud’s work. See also Laplanche and Pontalis, “Fantasy and the origins of sexuality.” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 49: 1 (1968): 1-18.

²⁷ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, 318.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In its performative play with subject positions—the spectator becomes a performer, the artist becomes a client—as well as in its fleeting effects, *Portraits de clients* seems to lend itself both narratively and experientially to this sort of psychic scenarization. The French critic, translator, and author of *The Laws of Hospitality*, Pierre Klossowski, puts it rather well, I think, when he describes the phantasm as “an *obsessional image* produced within us by the unconscious forces of our impulsive life.”²⁹

I have gone from a definition of the phantasm as an illusory perception to a definition of phantasy as a *mise-en-scène* of desire. In what follows, I shall reserve the term ‘phantasm’ for the perceptual disturbance occasioned by *Portraits de clients*, but I also want to keep this idea of phantasy (as I have described it) in play, because it reminds us of how these sorts of events can resolve fortuitously into overpowering and compelling scenarios where the subject has “a part to play not only as an observer but also as a participant.”³⁰ I take the relation between these two concepts to be more fluid than fixed.

4. Photography, intervention, photographs

In a way, there was nothing surprising about what happened. Figuring the phantasm as a kind of *punctum* could have almost been expected of anyone interested—as I had been in the months prior to visiting de Groot’s intervention—in photography’s

²⁹ Daniel W. Smith, “Klossowski’s Reading of Nietzsche: Impulses, Phantasms, Simulacra, Stereotypes,” *Diacritics* 35: 1 (2005), 13. Klossowski’s understanding of the phantasm as an obsessional image is a very important feature of Deleuze’s theoretical interest in the phantasm. See, *The Logic of Sense*, esp. 280-301.

³⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, 318.

nature, or function, as a theoretical object. Among the works that had informed me and untold others was Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), a text whose sphere of influence continues to grow. Barthes used the term *punctum* to name the interest that he takes in the details of particular photographs that deviate from and thereby interrupt the photograph's stable field of meaning, or what Barthes called the photograph's *studium*.

As Barthes's explains regarding such details as a sitter's dirty fingernails, a necklace, or a posing of the hand, this sort of detail is experienced as if accidentally: "it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me."³¹ This comes very close to describing the kind of interest that I think is elicited by the phantasm, which irrupts into the situation staged by de Groot's drawing exercise. The phantasm was a surprise, certainly, but it was a surprise that bore with it a particular kind of affective charge (a wounding) that had to do, as I explain here, with the exercise's appeal to the participant's memory.

The bank intervention is not a photograph, nor is the perceptual disturbance produced by *Portraits de clients* a detail. Nevertheless, I want to propose that this event produced an affective dynamic that is related to Barthes's understanding of photography, especially to his idea of the *punctum*—and this, for two reasons. First, we don't need to embrace Barthes's concern for the essence of photography when examining how his idea of the *punctum* applies to the interest we take in other kinds of objects or artworks. This is the argument made by Margaret Iversen in her important study, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*. Acknowledging the degree to which

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

Camera Lucida is an “emphatically medium-specific study,” Iversen goes on to make the point (following Rosalind Krauss and others) that “photography is not an isolated medium.” Rather, photography “must be seen as a key term in the visual arts,” on account of how drastically it has changed “our thinking about them.” Consequently, the “ideas elaborated [in *Camera Lucida*] are not exclusively relevant to photography.”³²

The second reason why I am tempted to align the phantasm’s effects with the *punctum* concerns some of the distinctions Barthes makes between the *punctum* and the errant photographic detail. Indeed, Barthes softens the link between these two elements (they cannot be confounded) when he suggests that the *punctum* can be delivered not only while one is looking at a photograph, but *after* one has seen it as well. Of James Van der Zee’s photograph of an African-American family, he says: “but this photograph had *worked* with me, and later on I realized that the real *punctum* was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was the same necklace ... I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry.”³³

That the picture need not be present at hand to elicit this interest, suggests that the *punctum* may be provoked by an image that is closer to the ground of memory and imagination than it is to the act of putative seeing. Who’s to say, after all, whether the remembered detail corresponds to the detail that is actually presented in the photograph.

³² Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 132.

³³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 53. In a recently published essay, Margaret Olin points out that Barthes was actually wrong about the necklace—he mis-remembered it—which, for her, underlines the radical mobility and drift of the *punctum*. See Olin, “Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes’s “Mistaken” Identification,” in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 79.

This distinction matters to me because it shows how actual physical seeing is not a necessary catalyst for the advent of the *punctum*. This is very similar to the interest that I think is elicited by the phantasm, understood not as something seen, but as something felt—a perceptual disturbance that catches me by surprise, and that, like the *punctum*, I have trouble naming.

Another thing that aligns the effects of the phantasm to the interest designated by the *punctum* is the *punctum*'s power of expansion. It is in part due to its resistance to language that the *punctum* is often thought to resist analysis, but Barthes admits that memory can serve as a substitute for this activity. The latency of memory (Barthes thinks of this latency as the ground of “a kind of second sight”³⁴) comes to stand in for the scrutiny of analysis. “However lighting-like it may be, the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, the power of expansion,” Barthes explains. “This power is often metonymic. ... [I]t makes me add something to the photograph.”³⁵ Barthes insisted on this: the *punctum* is powerful insofar as it animates me, that is, insofar as it makes me bring something to the photograph that does not correspond to my “sovereign consciousness.” This sort of additive process (“it makes me add something to the image”) exemplifies what Barthes regards as photography's “danger,” its “madness” *vis à vis* established and dominant ways of producing meaning.³⁶ It is worth keeping in

³⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁶ Near the end of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes between “mad” photographs and “tame” ones. Whereas “mad” photographs have the ability to tap an unconscious reserve of memory and desire, thereby truly *animating* the viewer (either in the moment of reception or at some moment after, egged on by recollection), “tame” photographs can only ever be experienced in virtue of a network of images whose values are governed by social conventions, or what Barthes refers to as a generalized image-repertoire (117-119).

mind here Laplanche and Pontalis's idea of phantasy (*un fantasme*) as a mise-en-scène of desire. Barthes had adopted a psychoanalytically inflected idea of phantasy as a kind of method (or rather, as an anti-method) in his later seminars, and this might have informed his alignment of photography in *Camera Lucida* not with "Painting," but with "Theatre."³⁷

For Barthes, it is a memory (and, I would argue, a phantasy) that is supposedly activated by a photograph when it is seen, remembered, or imagined; what I am proposing here is that this labour is taken up in de Groot's intervention by the perceptual phantasm. The quotient of memory and longing that the index cards force me to bring to the drawing exercise, and hence to the experience of the phantasm, is not unlike what Barthes says he brings to the photograph in place of a more distanced historical or sociological analysis.

All of this informs my reading of the single phrase that is most often used to characterize Barthes's idea of the *punctum*: "Last thing about the *punctum*: whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*."³⁸ Note, however, that whereas in earlier passages Barthes had distinguished the stray detail from what it triggers (i.e. the *punctum*), in this passage

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31. In this passage, Barthes evokes theatre in order to bring photography closer to death, and to death's sublimation in ancient theatre (*Camera Lucida*, 31-32). Various implicit references in Barthes's *Leçon* and more implicit ones in *The Neutral* (a course delivered in 1977) lead me to think that Barthes was familiar with Laplanche and Pontalis's conception of phantasy. Barthes articulates his teaching approach as one based on the "allées et venues d'un désir ... [d'] un fantasme," in *Leçon: Leçon inaugurale de la chaire de sémiologie littéraire du Collège de France, prononcé le 7 Janvier 1977* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978), 43-44.

³⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 55. For instance, Geoffrey Batchen makes reference to this passage in his editor's introduction to the collected volume, *Photography Degree Zero* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 12.

he brings the two domains together, tacitly suggesting the inextricability of the contingent detail (regardless of whether it is actually seen or merely remembered) from the psychical mise-en-scène that it occasions.

Given that it may be based on something physically *seen* or something *remembered* or *imagined*, this process that so characterizes the *punctum*—this process of adding what is nonetheless already there—can be confounding, to say the least.³⁹ The situation becomes a little clearer when Barthes, by way of example, narrates part of his thought process surrounding a photograph by André Kertész (which photograph he may or may not have in front of him).

There is a photograph by Kertész (1921) which shows a blind gypsy violinist being led by a boy; now what I see, *by means of this “thinking eye” which makes me add something to the photograph*, is the dirt road; its texture *gives me the certainty* of being in central Europe; I perceive the referent ..., I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels.⁴⁰

This passage recalls another comment that Barthes had made some pages back, concerning the interest he takes in certain landscape photographs. These landscapes (e.g., Charles Clifford’s early view of the Alhambra from 1845-46), he says, awaken in him “*the longing to inhabit*” them. “[I]t is *as if I were certain* of having been there or of going there.”⁴¹ Among other things, what these comments reveal is an interest qualified by memories and imaginings of a special kind: what Barthes seems to take from and

³⁹ Geoffrey Batchen’s discussion of this process as an example of semantic “contiguity” is useful here, but it does not sufficiently account for the element of certainty or conviction that I am about to underline here. See Batchen, “Carnal Knoweldge” in “The Body and Technology,” *Art Journal* 60: 1 (2001): 21-23.

⁴⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 45 (my emphasis).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40 (my emphasis).

add to these photographs is, in a sense, a quotient of certainty anchored in the latent memory, whose value has everything to do with the materiality of the photographic referent, but also with longing and the sorts of scenarios that longing summons up.

If there's a link between the *punctum* and the phantasm in *Portraits de clients*, it is in this mixture of elicited certainty and potent longing. In the case of the bank intervention, this element of certainty is cultivated by the fortuitous event of the phantasm. When the mask suddenly appears animated during the exercise, I am carried back to somewhere in myself, but somewhere that is *beyond* the shifting screen of faces and people I happen to remember. If I take the time to consider it, it is precisely the upsurge of this "beyond" in my experience that wounds and animates me, and which transforms the work into something personally significant.⁴² Still, it is a certainty that is tied to longing, insofar as the animated mask/phantasm disturbs my search for this or that trait, this or that descriptor of identity.

Margaret Iversen is also concerned with the *punctum*'s capacity for expansion, especially as it applies to the interest that we take in non-photographic objects. Her discussion of the *punctum* proves useful in the context of de Groot's work not only because it expands on what I have been saying, but because it brings out important elements of the intervention's historicity as an artistic gesture.

In *Beyond Pleasure*, Iversen reads *Camera Lucida* through the lens of Jacques Lacan's influential *The Four Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964). For Iversen, the *punctum* is continuous with the (Lacanian) conception of the irruption of the real—a dimension of experience that, though insistent and repeating, cannot be "subsumed into

⁴² *Ibid.*, 59.

the symbolic, linguistic, conceptual apparatus of culture.”⁴³ The encounter with the real is “ultimately an encounter with the persistently denied fact of one’s own mortality.”⁴⁴ To substantiate this, Iversen reminds us that death—and modern society’s masking of it—was an operant term in Barthes’s figuring of the *punctum*. “But Barthes,” she adds, “develops this painful recognition from a negative into a positive, from dark to light” by embracing the *punctum* and by opposing it to those tamer images that are incapable of wounding him.⁴⁵ Significantly, according to Iversen, this articulation of the real is one of the features that distinguishes Barthes’s conception of photography from ideas of the “depthless simulacrum” in accounts of postmodern art and photography.⁴⁶

At the heart of Iversen’s claims are, I believe, issues concerning the analysis of works of art in light of advanced capitalist societies and their institutions of art and art-historical research.⁴⁷ In particular, Iversen is concerned with the relation between ideas of the simulacral and the real in the postmodern era. In the final chapter of her book, she reminds us that, since the early 1980s, appraisals of the simulacrum have tended to stress those features of photographic artworks that, by exacerbating the equivalence of

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115. I discuss Barthes’s distinction between “mad” and “tame” in note 36. On Barthes’s embrace of *pathos* as something active and affirmative, see also *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 13-14, 77. This transformation of an experience akin to death, “from a negative into a positive” (Iversen 2007: 114), is consistent with de Groot’s ideas on the *pathos* of her performances. See R. de Groot, “En Exercice: Mise à l’épreuve de la figure de l’artiste,” 30.

⁴⁶ Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure*, 133.

⁴⁷ Here I am taking my cue from Michael Podro, who defines the project of the nineteenth-century “critical historians of art” as a function of their engagement with the problem of how to “explore particular works of art in light of our conception of art—of those principles which [govern] art as a whole.” *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), xv. As a Riegl scholar and a past student of Podro’s, Iversen would be familiar with this problematic.

signs, obliterate the possibility of reference, and thereby undermine “idealist ideologies of the autonomous self” (a dynamic often expressed in terms of photographic and increasingly digital reproducibility).⁴⁸ As a consequence, she argues, the real, the indexical, and referentiality completely drop out from the theoretical narrative, and with it our (cultural) conception of ourselves as finite, fragile, and desiring beings. Ideas of the (Lacanian) real, by contrast, bring to our attention those features of artworks that procure an encounter with the real, thereby pointing to what may lie beyond the de-realizing screen of contemporary, image-saturated culture. Reference exists, but it is opaque and ambiguous.⁴⁹ This dimension of the (Lacanian) real adds a new layer of meaning to the title of the exhibition in which de Groot’s intervention took place:

Making Real/Rendre réel.

What Iversen draws to our attention in her exemplary reading of *Camera Lucida* is that these two registers are often conjoined, and that it is this mixture of semantic equivalence and traumatic impact, the banality of repetition and the singularity of animation, that marks the affinity of certain artworks (and theories) with issues of postmodernity. She considers the work of Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, and, indeed, *Camera Lucida*, to be examples of this. What I want to suggest is that the impressions of a “beyond,” of “lack,” and of “coming up short” prompted by *Portraits de clients* can be described as an example of this kind of irruption of the real—an example that the field of photographic studies nevertheless tutors its students to *look for* (blunting Barthes’s lesson) and to *manage* in the creation of works of art (missing his point entirely).

⁴⁸ Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure*, 137.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 145-149.

Obviously *Portraits de clients* is not and cannot be confused with a photograph, not even metaphorically. Yet, as I have tried to show, it happens that some of the language we have developed around photography can help us describe the intensity of its effects. I see this as part of Iversen's wager. De Groot's bank intervention is "photographic" in this way—it lends itself to a certain (theoretical) idiom of photography. Although the phantasm in *Portraits* is not a detail, it still acts as a kind of unexpected trigger, which forces me to add something to the exercise that is nonetheless already there. In my account of the *punctum*, I have tried to describe this 'something' as a sense of conviction that is fuelled by longing—like the longing to remember or imagine someone in their fullness as human beings. The phantasm works at the level of sensation (cognitive psychologists call it the 'ventriloquist effect,' a residue of the confusion between the modalities of seeing and hearing), but, in de Groot's intervention, it also implicates memory and the imagination in important ways.⁵⁰ The index card and the drawing exercise secure visitors' 'personal' involvement. But when the phantasm appears, my memories inhere in it as well, sweeping me up in a movement beyond my control. Thus, the appearance of the phantasm forces me to think. I become aware of myself as an agent who is also a patient in this situation, which I find to be at once pleasurable and disconcerting.

The effects of *Portraits de clients*, as I am describing them here, seem to point to what Iversen, in her book, calls "an aesthetic beyond pleasure," where the viewer's

⁵⁰ Jeanne Vroomen and Beatrice de Gelder, "Perceptual effects of cross-modal stimulation: Ventriloquism and the freezing phenomenon," In G. Calvert, C. Spence & B.E. Stein, eds., *Handbook of multisensory processes* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004): 141-150. Available at <http://www.beatricedegelder.com/documents/Vroomen2004Perceptualeffects.pdf> (accessed September 12, 2011).

psychic and corporeal implication in the work involves both an effort towards mastery and pleasure, and a coincidental inability to master, which results in an experience of lack.⁵¹ The *punctum* doesn't enthrall or astonish, it is not spectacular; it is formed through surprise, sometimes belatedly. Whether seen or remembered, it stirs memory in such a way that part of the subject goes with it, but not completely and only temporarily.

Crucially, however, the phantasm's allusion to photography as a theoretical object overlooks much of what is interesting about the *actual* Polaroid photographs produced in the course of de Groot's intervention. These photographic objects do not fit easily within Iversen's idea of the *punctum* as a conduit of what Hal Foster refers to as "traumatic realism."⁵² They are too tame for that.⁵³ Furthermore, in their function as souvenirs or as "tie-signs" (which I discuss below), the Polaroids may even work to counter the defamiliarizing effects of the intervention. In this and other ways, the material persistence of the Polaroids adds a greater degree of complexity to our understanding of the affective economy of *Portraits de clients* as a whole. The Polaroids, it seems, expose the memory of *Portraits de clients* to social rituals that the intervention itself tries to work with, pry open, and expose; by not eliciting a *punctum* (for me), they appear to introduce a tension between their function as vehicles of identity formation, and the intervention's attempt to throw habitual modes of perception and interaction off of their institutionally-supported course. All of the following entries point, in one way or another, to similar kinds of tensions between the intervention and

⁵¹ Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure*, 1-6.

⁵² See Hal Foster, "The Return of the Real," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006): 122-170.

⁵³ I discuss Barthes's distinction between "mad" and "tame" in note 36.

the Polaroids. In the next entry, I turn to an anthropological model with the aim of better describing the life of the Polaroids as cultural objects, both during and after de Groot's intervention.

5. Material systems of the Polaroid

In anthropology, a material systems approach refers to a methodological tool that allows students of material culture to make sense of cultural artifacts as they exist in particular cultural and historical situations, in relationship to “a network of other objects, concepts, and behaviours.”⁵⁴ This is the case for Barrie Reynolds, who considers the houses built by the Kwandu of south-western Zambia and Angola as existing in relation to a dynamic network of intertribal alliances, shifting national borders, and settling patterns.⁵⁵ Similarly, for Nuno Porto, thinking in terms of material systems and object biographies allows him to describe the agency of a set of photographic portraits in light of adjustments in the bureaucratic practices of the Portuguese in Angola, circa mid-1900s.⁵⁶ As a heuristic model, then, a material-systems approach allows researchers to “trace” (to use Reynolds’ term) networks of objects, ideas, and behaviours from individual artifacts’ facture and use, effectively translating these artifacts into virtual demonstrations of broader patterns of meaning and human relations.

⁵⁴ Nuno Porto, “‘Under the Gaze of the Ancestors’: Photographs and Performance in Colonial Angola,” in *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (New York: Routledge, 2004), 119.

⁵⁵ Barrie Reynolds, “Material Systems: An Approach to the Study of Kwandu Material Culture,” in *Material Anthropology: Contemporary Approaches to Material Culture*, ed. Barrie Reynolds and Margaret A. Stott (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

⁵⁶ Porto, “Under the Gaze of the Ancestors.”

A material-systems approach can provide a useful starting-point for considering the varied and sometimes conflicting values linked to the *Portraits de clients* Polaroids—both in specific situations, and throughout their career as cultural objects. What objects, ideas, and behaviours are the Polaroids articulated with when we imagine them broadly as agents in de Groot’s intervention? Here, I would like to draw attention to a series of stages, or “theatres,” that seem to mark the social life of the Polaroid. These correspond, temporally: to the time when the Polaroids were made (i.e. to the fluid ‘here-and-now’ of the intervention); to the moments after the intervention when they are shared in the context of formal or informal encounters; to the time when they are presented as part of a later art installation (*Casting*); to the time of art-historical writing and research (MA thesis). As with Porto’s examples, these different “theatres” signal the Polaroids’ shifts from one material system to another.

One shortcoming of a material-systems approach is that it risks reducing the highly charged and chaotic life of things to the rhythms of a *system*—a system whose “settings” have been set in advance by the institutionally legitimated actions, interests, and desires of anthropologists, among others. Material systems are often invoked unreflexively (note, for instance, that neither Porto nor Reynolds consider anthropology as a new material system for their artifacts), which allows anthropology’s own ritualized performance of material culture to go unacknowledged. This is something that occurs to me when I consider the interpretative processes that are staged in, and instigated by, the drawing exercise in *Portraits de clients*. In the encounter between the projective identifications of the visitor and the artist’s desire for *dépaysement*, for instance, a line of flight is drawn from which precipitate further exercises and thought-

experiments; it is in this way that the drawing exercise can be said to form a rhizome, which, connecting to this text, expresses a difference “that has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows.”⁵⁷

Obviously the image of interpretation that *Portraits de clients* constructs cannot replace the function of a material-systems approach. But it can be added to it. Thus, in addition to imagining the Polaroids as agents in dynamic and shifting social theatres, we might consider the following question. What if we treated the *Portraits de clients* Polaroids with the same attitude that de Groot brings to the index cards? Would they be describable to a blind interpreter in terms of fixed stages and careers around which are organized systems of ideas, behaviours, and objects? What do the portraits demonstrate, if not the desires of the audience as they appear refracted through the techniques of the intervention? This forces us to add to our conception of material systems a corresponding acknowledgement that the object of interpretation always retains (just as it is always compelled by) an element in transport, displacement, becoming, that is inextricable from the storied discursive formations in which it takes place. In the context of *Portraits de clients*, this means asking how “the object itself” acts upon and transforms, territorializes and deterritorializes, our interpretations.

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21. The de-/reterritorializations provoked by *Portraits de clients* can be usefully considered in light of the authors’ description (in page 10) of the rhizome formed by the interaction of an orchid and a wasp.

6. “Sites of representational transformation”

A material-systems approach, then, is able to attune us to the different functions and meanings of the Polaroids as they exist in one material system or another—from the site of the intervention, to a participant’s home (or the street), to an academic setting with one set of Polaroids; and, simultaneously, with the other set of Polaroids, from the intervention, to the artist’s collection, to the later installation titled *Casting*. But when one begins to compare this approach to the scene of interpretation that de Groot builds around the index cards, there arises another question: what might the significance of such objects be when one takes into account not only their existence in particular material systems, but *their movement* from one material system to another, as happens to be the case with the migration of the Polaroids? This question comes up especially when one considers the effort that de Groot goes to to distance the abandoned ID cards from conventional systems of representation, all the while drawing much attention to the deviant traces that result. How might one *characterize* this strange threshold that de Groot’s intervention opens up, where words and objects are made to stray from their familiar or intended meanings, and which also compels me to supplement my understanding of how material systems work with an element of indeterminacy?

David Tomas’s idea of “transcultural space,” along with the closely related notion of “transcultural beings,” suggests one possible way of characterizing this aspect of *Portraits de clients*. Tomas’s book, *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings*, takes a theoretically innovative approach to the written and visual records of first- and early-contact situations between British groups and Andamanese Islanders around the late-eighteenth century. In this book, Tomas is particularly interested in historical

documents (ship's logs, journals of surveying expeditions, photographs, etc.) that suggest the occurrence of "odd events" or situations that are not only occasioned by culture contact, but also "governed by misrepresentation and representational excess."⁵⁸ These are events that, in large part because of their insignificance, "ephemerality, transience, and humour," seem "to escape all classification."⁵⁹

Occasioned by chance or accident in moments of intercultural exchange (during trading, for instance, or surveying), these events permit the creation of what Tomas calls transcultural space and transcultural beings. As I understand it, transcultural space designates a perceptual and discursive in-between, a noisy middle-ground, that occurs in moments of intercultural contact and that is indicative of a temporary scrambling of different or opposing frames of reference. By "transcultural beings" Tomas means people (and sometimes objects), "especially from other cultures," that exist "only as raw material to be transformed into more easily accessible and visual forms" by Western systems of representation.⁶⁰ Depictions of these individuals produce a transcultural space when they exhibit the cracks as well as the power mechanisms inhering in culturally bound systems of representation.

This is the case of "Jack," an Andamanese Islander who, from 1857-1858, was made to pass through a circuit of "identity-generating sites of representational transformation."⁶¹ After being taken aboard the *Pluto* and transported to Calcutta, Jack was dressed in Western clothing, presented in front of mirrors, represented in the form

⁵⁸ David Tomas, *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

of a talky mannequin, photographed, and anthropometrically measured, before being transported back to Andamanese shores. In his analysis, Tomas suggests that, on one hand, the deployment of systems of representation locked Jack into “more easily accessible verbal and visual forms”—forms which dovetailed with European fantasies of moral superiority—while, on the other hand, signalling the insufficiency of each system or site of representation, thereby turning it into a site of misrepresentation. “Although Jack might have ‘recognized’ himself [as Jack in his photographic portrait], others continued in their search for his essence [as an Andamanese ‘other’].”⁶²

There is a lot going on in Tomas’s sketch of this situation, most of it having little to do with how we evaluate the situation of *Portraits de clients*. Yet something about Tomas’s approach—perhaps it is his interest in the instability of Jack’s identity, once Jack begins to move through these representational mechanisms—that comes close to describing de Groot’s attitude towards the ID cards and the clients in the bank.

For where is an adequate picture of Jack to be found in these representations? Where is his most accurate, or representative image, to be found but in the *movement* between identity-generating site[s], in the movement, therefore, between representations. For it is this movement that provides the bridge between sites and the different topographic maps of a particular Andamanese body, maps that are revealed, each in turn, to be sites of misrepresentation. Jack *is*, as such, more than anything else, a surface image in flux.⁶³

It is worth adding that, for Tomas, this “surface image in flux”—this image that *is* Jack—exists on the same speculative plane of thought as the Andaman Islands themselves. As Tomas explains in his introduction, “[t]he Andaman Islands will always

⁶² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 91.

float like a mirage that exists ‘somewhere’ between event and dream, in an imaginary space whose currents flow from representation to nonrepresentation, from existence to nonexistence.”⁶⁴ It is as if Tomas saw the setting of his study (the Andaman Islands) not only as having allowed for the creation of transcultural space and transcultural beings, but also as being itself a transcultural space of sorts—mirage-like, is how he puts it.

Now, I am tempted to think about Raphaëlle de Groot’s bank intervention as an exemplary dramatization of this layered idea of transcultural space, where a series of slippery and contingent episodes of misrepresentation occur within an equally elusive and contested plane of misrepresentation. Consider, for instance, the intervention and how it was organized to ‘feed’ the figure of the client through an analogous (though by no means equivalent) circuit of representational transformations, which resulted in the figuring of the bank client as being neither here nor there but as a “surface image in flux.” Furthermore, consider how this circuit of (mis)representation itself traversed at least two contested sites of representation: I am thinking especially of the ‘origin’ of de Groot’s work in the site-symbol of exhausted capitalism and staged tourism colonized by Fraser’s exhibition, and subsequently evoked in de Groot’s *Casting* installation.

But if I say *tempted*, it is because there’s a rub, or a snag (fuelled by a misapprehension?) that presents itself the moment one cosies up to this kind of reading. A transcultural space? In *Portraits de clients*? Not quite. Even if one considers de Groot’s artistically staged encounter as an example of how a transcultural space can “result from [an] *intracultural* misunderstanding” fuelled by “representational dislocations in *systematically* based circuits of representation,” this would dangerously

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

overlook the cruelty of “Jack’s” forced transformations in that colonial setting; there is, of course, is no such cruelty in *Portraits de clients*, whose dislocations one enters into voluntarily.⁶⁵ I wonder whether I’ve overextended myself—getting caught up in the slippage between *characterization* and *exemplification*—by pursuing a resemblance between a theoretical model and an artwork that is as misleading as it is theoretically productive.

Tomas’s research into transcultural space was motivated by his concern for the “unacknowledged” (because pedestrian, fleeting, and unstable) “preconditions of British anthropology” as it came to be practiced in the Andaman Islands. Not so with *Portraits de clients*. This work’s staging of identity and miscommunication seems to point to a situation of culture contact, if one can still call it that, whose conditions are of an altogether different order. I want to keep Tomas’s appeal to representational transformation, miscommunication, and flux, while saying that the cracks in communication produced by *Portraits de clients* point to a very different kind of encounter situation—one in which the identities that form around art making and art viewing (the traditional practice of the artist, and the traditional practice of the museum visitor) are put in question. Following Raymond Williams’s definition of “culture,” I want to suggest that art making and art viewing can constitute salient modalities of different types of cultures, whose frames of reference are, as such, distinct from those

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 70 and 1. Tomas expands the methodological scope of *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings* in a later book, applying it to thresholds that lie beyond first- and early-contact situations. This expansion, Tomas suggests, is licensed by the belief that “any contested space, ... any situation in which communication is absent or destabilized and a fissure is produced in a culture, is fertile ground for the generation of a transcultural space between opposing groups of people or individuals.” In Tomas, *Beyond the Image Machine: A History of Visual Technologies* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 7.

that usually preoccupy theorists of transcultural space.⁶⁶ The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has described the genesis of aesthetic value as being in part a function of art viewers' projective self-identification with the artist's creative mastery.⁶⁷ By using the mask to obscure her artistic "self" (thereby entering into a domain of un-mastery), as well as by using it to put up a less-than-perfect mirror to participants' expectations—not to mention the more general way in which she 'outs' the creative act as an effortful and compromising process—de Groot appears to intervene symbolically at just this juncture of valuation.

The *Portraits de clients* Polaroids, especially as they are re-presented in *Casting*, and especially if they are regarded a little askance, can serve as excellent examples of this other kind of culture contact. (Interested readers might here wish to turn to the more detailed description of *Casting* in the Appendix.) As an ensemble, the Polaroids presented in *Casting* convey a ludic attitude towards the formation of identity; their fugitive representation of the artist, the visitor, and the figure of the client has an affinity with Tomas's description of sites of miscommunication and semantic excess. Not only are these identities formed relationally, but they are in part the unstable result of the confluence of the artist's and the audience's desires. Moreover, regarding these photographs and the ephemeral intervention to which they refer, it is not difficult to become aware of *Portraits de clients*'s own function as a cultural object caught up in

⁶⁶ I am referring to Williams's definition of the term "culture" as, among other things, "an independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general." In Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 90.

⁶⁷ See Allen Dunn, "Who Needs a Sociology of the Aesthetic? Freedom and Value in Pierre Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*," *boundary 2* 25: 1 (Spring 1998): 87-110.

the material circuits of a broader exhibitionary complex. In the following entry, I pursue this line of inquiry by examining the place of *Portraits de clients* from the perspective of the objectives of the Ottawa exhibition.

7. *Making Real* and “relational aesthetics”

Portraits de clients may have invited participation, but it also made a spectacle of that participation, consequently drawing attention to the intervention’s framing—its material and discursive conditions of production and reception. As a rhizome, its framing is unlimited, but keeping to the exhibitionary complex imagined by the show’s organizers, the work can be described as participating in a strategy of cultural encounter. *Making Real/Rendre réel* was commissioned by the Quebec Scene cultural festival—a sprawling sixteen-day event held in more than twenty-five venues throughout the National Capital Region. Organized by the National Arts Centre, a government-funded cultural organization usually devoted to supporting the performing arts in Canada, this biannual event was conceived and continues to be organized with the aim of showcasing the artistic talent of Canada’s provinces and territories.⁶⁸ This institutional context indicates how the presentational experiments and social situations orchestrated by *Portraits de clients* were themselves nested within a broader agenda of exhibition and display, organized to fulfill part of the NAC’s federative mission.⁶⁹

Making Real/Rendre réel was designed to show a sample of *in situ* works by a mix of well-established and promising emerging artists from Quebec. As an ensemble,

⁶⁸ National Arts Centre, “Annual Report 2006-2007,” 13, accessed September 12, 2011, http://www.nac-cna.ca/pdf/corporate/AR_06-07.pdf.

⁶⁹ National Arts Centre, “Strategic Plan 2008-2013: ‘Performing for Canadians,’” 19, accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.nac-cna.ca/pdf/corporate/stratplan2008.pdf>.

these works made a statement about art's capacity to "[dissect] the experience of reality" by "engag[ing] the viewer directly," thereby "redefin[ing] our relationship to art and to each other."⁷⁰ For curator Fraser, the idea of the "real" seems to refer primarily to whatever exists outside (but also in-between, on the surface, beneath, behind, in relation to) a given symbolic or representational frame. As she states in relation to installations and interventions produced by the collective BGL (an example of which she also included in the Ottawa exhibition), the real may be expressed through the "psychological feeling" occasioned by works that stage a conflict between different and sometimes conflicting perceptions of reality.⁷¹

A limitless number of inferences can be drawn from *Portraits de clients* on the basis of this structure of feeling. Consider the use of the index cards as a point of departure, and how de Groot appears to have handled them in a manner that encouraged the participant's identification while leaving open the possibility of an experience of estrangement and *dépaysement*. Raphaëlle de Groot began her artistic career in the mid 1990s, a time that loosely corresponds with a spike in critical interest in *in situ* and participatory (or "relational") modes of art-making in Quebec. As Véronique Leblanc

⁷⁰ Quebec Scene, "Quebec Scene Gallery—*Making Real*," festival website, accessed September 12, 2011,

<http://www.quebecscene.ca/en/events/eventDetails.asp?eventID=179>.

⁷¹ Marie Fraser, "BGL: Working the Real," *Parachute* 122 (2006): 119. Quebec artists' (and critics') engagement with the real is also discussed in Fraser, ed. *Le ludique* (Quebec: Musée du Québec, 2001) and in Patrice Loubier and Anne-Marie Ninacs, eds., *Les commenseaux: Quand l'art se fait circonstances/When Art Becomes Circumstance* (Montreal: Skol centre d'arts actuels, 2001). The French art critic and historian, Paul Ardenne, is an important protagonist in these discussions. See, for instance, Ardenne's *Un art contextuel: création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

reminds us, these practices frequently use social relations (“la relation comme un espace de négociation entre soi et autrui”) as a primary artistic material:

Utilisée comme un matériau par les artistes, la relation convoque la notion d’altérité de manière à interroger la notion d’identité et l’idée de communauté. Elle trouve également, dans le caractère déstabilisant de l’étrangeté, les fondaments de son potentiel critique et sa dimension intrinsèquement politique.⁷²

Certainly one of the most influential, and polemical, accounts of this phenomenon, in both anglophone and francophone cultural milieus, has been Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Esthétique relationnelle* (1995, translated into English in 2002).⁷³ The art historian Claire Bishop has written critically about this text. Specifically, she takes Bourriaud to task for putting forward a convivial view of relatedness that disavows more agonistic ways of being together.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, Leblanc proceeds by comparing the work of five artists and artist groups (among them Devora Neumark’s *Présence*, de Groot’s *8 x 5 x 363 + 1*, and ATSA’s *État d’urgence*), with the aim of elaborating a conception of art-as-social-negotiation that is capable of acknowledging participatory art’s more conflictual dimensions, as well as its convivial ones.

Paul Ardenne takes stock of the institutionalization of interventionist art in an article published in the important catalogue project, *Les commenseaux: Quand l’art se fait circonstances/When Art Becomes Circumstance* (2001). Today, Ardenne writes, “this trend has become widespread. Far from always having a subversive value or being

⁷² V. Leblanc, “La relation comme espace de négociation,” 8.

⁷³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

⁷⁴ Claire Bishop “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.” *October* 110 (Fall 2004). Bishop’s edited volume, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel, 2004), samples a range of critical and theoretical writings on the subject of participation in art from the 1960s to the present.

a subversion of democracy, the intervention often represents—other than an example of art’s allegiance to an often manipulative officialdom—another incidence of the “social spectacle,” in some cases even passing as entertainment.”⁷⁵ Art historians like Miwon Kwon and Johanne Lamoureux have expressed similar reservations.⁷⁶ Ardenne, though, is particularly weary of this tendency among institutionally sponsored interventions that transform the encounter into a social spectacle. He therefore contrasts these gestures with interventions that are “ordinary” rather than magnanimous in their aspirations—artistic actions that “have an impact, yes, but [that are] inconclusive” in terms of their expected social function and meaning.⁷⁷

Historians and theorists of interventionist art may thus find it significant that the works in *Making Real/Rendre réel* (including de Groot’s intervention) were commissioned. Although it was presented without any accompanying wall-text, and although it included some elements of surprise, *Portraits de clients* was far from fitting neatly into an interventionist rhetoric of the “furtive,” in Patrice Loubier’s sense of gestures and artworks whose status as art remains ambiguous upon reception inside or outside the traditional gallery setting.⁷⁸ Indeed, de Groot’s name was among the first announced in the advance press material for the exhibition, which itself was widely advertised in the national media. Presented a year after de Groot was featured on the cover of the internationally distributed *Parachute* magazine (April-June issue, 2006), it

⁷⁵ Ardenne, “Public Art: Ambiguity and Crisis of Impact,” trans. Jannine Hopkinson, in *Les Commenseaux* (2001), 207.

⁷⁶ Miwon Kwon, “One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 85-110; Johanne Lamoureux, *L’art insituable: de l’in situ et autres sites* (Montreal: Centre de Diffusion 3D, 2001).

⁷⁷ Ardenne, “Public Art,” 210.

⁷⁸ See Patrice Loubier, “To Take Place, To Disappear: On Certain Shifts Between Art and Reality,” trans. Jannine Hopkinson, in *Les Commenseaux* (2001), 201-206.

is plausible that more informed art viewers would have seen the destabilizing effects of *Portraits de clients* coming. A vague memory of this *Parachute* cover image, of de Groot struggling beneath a large bulbous paper mask, accompanied me as I made my way towards the bank. Nevertheless, within the context of the intervention, *Portraits de clients* tried to set out a field of indeterminacy capable of reflecting critically on its conditions of production and reception.

These debates around the idea of the relational in participatory art stand out as an important feature of the material and interpretative context of de Groot's Ottawa gesture. Though it seems to pale in comparison to *8 x 5 x 363 + 1* (2002-2006)—a vast project undertaken by de Groot with workers at a textile factory in Biella, Italy—*Portraits de clients* exhibits qualities that demand to be 'read' from this general perspective. Broadly speaking, one recognizes the artistry of *Portraits de clients* as having less to do with the form, colour, and composition of the clients' portraits, than with the forms of thought and experience that were its results. I have already noted how de Groot singles out the dynamics of blindness and effort that were instigated by *Portraits de clients*. These elements of negotiation seem to accompany the life of the Polaroids as well.

One might pause to wonder about the slippage that occurs between, on one hand, the place accorded to the bank client in the structure of the exercise and, on the other, to the place accorded to the visitor (who happens to be "client" in relation to the experience offered by the work). The institutionalization of participatory and relational art in the past two decades has sparked arguments about how to judge the convergence of artistic strategies of de-materialization with the rise of the experience economy, and

its effects on the operations of the contemporary (sometimes equally de-materialized) art museum.⁷⁹ As Bishop reminds us, “one could argue that in this context, project-based works-in-progress and artists-in-residence begin to dovetail with an ‘experience economy’,” which she describes as “the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences.”⁸⁰

The point is well taken and worth pursuing, but I want to add a caveat to it. It is a question of the work’s dialectics: *Portraits de clients* appears to tender the possibility of an experience, and part of this experience involves (at least for me) navigating an image of oneself as a dupe—I am thinking here specifically of the somatic effects of the phantasm. In Mexico, where I was born, and where I grew up until just before the 1994 crash of the peso, the word *cliente* is frequently used to refer to “dupes” (this is an epithet that means, at its base, that you have bought into an image of reality that, according to others, is dangerously and often comically misconstrued). Anyone who has agreed to be caricatured by a street artist and paid for the stinging results has tasted something of this experience. One might say that *Portraits de clients* interpellates the participant as a *cliente*, to the degree that it toys with her or his habitual perception of art and of reality. Louise Déry paints a very different picture of the (potential) client as dupe. For Déry, members of the public who believe “que l'on rit d'eux”—and who, on

⁷⁹ One can cite as a marker of this process the exhibition and catalogue, *Caught in the Act: The Viewer as Performer*, with contributions by Stephen Horne, Anne-Marie Ninacs, Amanda Kelly, Greg A. Hill, and Josée Drouin-Birsebois (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 2008). On the subject of the experience economy, see B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

⁸⁰ Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” 52. Cf. Johanne Lamoureux, “Le musée en pièces détachées,” in *L’art insituable*, esp. 73-77. In this essay, Lamoureux discusses the discursive paradoxes that dog site-specific art installations presented in sites that are peripheral to the museum.

that basis, adopt a skeptical stance toward the value of current art—represent a receding horizon in Quebec’s heavily publicly subsidized contemporary art system.⁸¹ What is the relation between these two apparently diametrically opposed invocations of the dupe, one willing to be fooled and the other far from it? Does the relational composition of *Portraits de clients*, with its playful invitation to willingly suspend one’s disbelief, work in part to sublimate the more skeptical conditions of reception alluded to by Déry? Would a more comprehensive analysis of this aspect of *Portraits de clients* reveal how this work plays with participation and dupery to outplay such forms of skepticism? The function of the Polaroids as tie-signs and as tokens provides some clues.

8. Polaroids: as tie-signs and as tokens

In *The Gift Economy*, sociologist David Cheal argues that modern practices of gift-giving and reciprocity figure less as remnants of a forgotten, premodern past, as Marcel Mauss believed but, rather, function as vibrant nodes in the “moral economy” of advanced capitalist societies. A capitalist mode of production, Cheal tells us, leads to highly particularized and segmented domains of social reality, effectively intensifying experiences of stranger contact. Even though they cost energy, time, and money, acts of gift-giving and reciprocity persist in these situations because they strengthen an individual’s network of familiars. They do this mainly by providing a medium through which one can coordinate and stabilize one’s relationships with others.⁸² According to Cheal, gifts function as “tie-signs” in this way.⁸³ Cheal borrows the concept of the tie-

⁸¹ Louise Déry, *L’Engagement* (Montreal: Les petits carnets, 1998), 38.

⁸² David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1988), esp. ch. 1 and 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

sign from Erving Goffman. For Goffman, the tie-sign is a gesture that signals to interlocutors and to others something about the nature of the relationship that is taking place.⁸⁴ Kissing, hand-holding, and gift-giving at Christmas time are all common examples of tie-signs in Western societies.

In *Portraits de clients*, de Groot gives one of the Polaroids to the visitor. Her act functions as a tie-sign: it performatively indicates that a personal or social relationship is being “anchored in a framework of mutual recognition.”⁸⁵ In research survey methods, tokens of this sort are often used to cement the social arrangement between the researcher and the participants; insofar as they happen not on monetary but on moral grounds, these exchanges are thought to elicit feelings of affinity and obligation among actors that may otherwise have little else in common.⁸⁶ Variations in the binding effects of tie-signs depend largely on context. As photographic historian Martha Langford suggests, the exchange of Polaroids for poses in ethnographic and social documentary situations can, in many cases, “mean creating a consumerist desire and fulfilling it in one stroke.”⁸⁷ A situation in which I pose for you and you give me a

⁸⁴ Erving Goffman discusses the tie-sign in *Relations in Public* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 194-9.

⁸⁵ Cheal, *Gift Economy*, 22.

⁸⁶ Shelly Boulianne, “Incentives,” in Paul J. Lavrakas, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Survey Research Methods*, vol. 1 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 329. Accessed July 22, 2011. http://0-go.galegroup.com.mercury.concordia.ca/ps/i.do?&id=GALE%7CCX3073300230&v=2.1&u=concordi_main&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w

⁸⁷ Personal communication with the author, July 18, 2011. Even before the advent of the faster and more user-friendly SX-70 Polaroid process, anthropologists were promoting the “small but useful” contribution of the Polaroid Land system in situations of fieldwork. Writing in 1963, for instance, J. N. Petersen and N. Sebag-Montefiore single out two significant attributes of the technology: “First, [the Polaroid Land camera] was invaluable for making friends with and gaining the confidence of the tribe which we worked with,” and this largely “because they could have photographs for

picture in return can thus render explicit the inextricability of tie-signs from broader ideological formations.

Furthermore, and unlike the use of tokens in survey methods, the uniqueness of Polaroid images (no two are identical) can quickly turn them into valued possessions in the field. In a journal entry from 1978, the ethnographic filmmaker, Robert Gardner, admits with some indignation how

A Polaroid made is most likely a photograph lost so intent are the subjects on possessing them. I had the idea of doing a series on the male dancers to see if there was any agreement about what set of facial features defined the ideal Borrero. But I have been able to keep only a few of the many I have made. Doing this has also created a sideshow that is hard to manage and doesn't make for much good will.⁸⁸

This passage, with its emphasis on the collection that could have been, begs the question of why two Polaroids were produced for each exercise in *Portraits de clients* rather than just one? Making two Polaroids would certainly serve to dilute and defuse potential conflicts surrounding the photograph's possession.

De Groot's intervention not only mediates but plays with this layered ethnographic or documentary scenario, making the artist-collector pose in front of the

themselves." And secondly, they state, the relative immediacy of the process incited members of the same tribe (the Araguana of Northern Peru) to arrange their own group portraits in a way that symbolically reproduced "the village's social structure." Petersen and Sebag-Montefiore, "A Note on the Use of the Polaroid Land Camera in the Field," *Man* 63 (1963): 58.

⁸⁸ Gardner, *The Impulse to Preserve: Reflections of a Filmmaker*, ed. Ted Perry (New York: Other Press, 1996), 195. Eight of these SX-70 portraits appear on a two-page spread when you flip the page. Yet it is the gap that Gardner evokes—"I have been able to keep only a few of the many"—that is most reminiscent of Tomas's description of transcultural space (described above). Here, I think, might be an example of a space of miscommunication peeking through the fault-lines of an ethnographic system of representation.

camera, and placing the visitor—who is equally under scrutiny but in a different way—on the operator’s side of the lens. You take one and I’ll keep the other, she says about the resulting Polaroids. Performed in this way, the photographic objects in *Portraits de clients* are transformed into tokens and virtual reminders that ritually ratify the art intervention as an interpersonal and moral exchange.

The art critic Patrice Loubier writes about the function of the gift in contemporary interventionist practices in Quebec. “Donation, community: these terms suggest that furtive interventions are not that different from relational practice: they demonstrate a common will to disrupt the compartmentalization of social life through the creation of interstices and passageways.”⁸⁹ Loubier here is drawing on the influential book, *L’esprit du don* (1992), in which Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé underline the saving power of the gift—its ability to bind strangers and to create new social formations, in virtue of a logic distinct from that which is said to govern situations of self-interested market exchange.

The anthropologist David Graeber has proposed a theory of the fetish that builds on and runs parallel to Caillé’s conception of the gift and gift exchange as complex instruments of social creation. Specifically, Graeber argues that the fetish has been used historically in moments of volatile intercultural encounter—in what Tomas would call transcultural spaces—in order to make “contracts and agreements,” or to forge “new associations.”⁹⁰ This conjuncture between gift and fetish can, I believe, prove valuable to critical analyses of relational art, which too often tend to overlook or dismiss the

⁸⁹ Loubier, “To Take Place, To Disappear,” 204.

⁹⁰ David Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity: or, Fetishes are Gods in the Process of Construction,” *Anthropological Theory* 5: 4 (2005): 411.

(potential) agency of the material objects that are produced and often distributed during these events.

One of the shortcomings of Cheal's theoretical model, however, is that it is ill-equipped to deal with unorthodox, ambiguous, or liminal gift-giving gestures. Similarly, it cannot account for gift situations that may align exchanging parties with identities that are socially disprized. Anthropological and cross-disciplinary accounts of the gift, such as Osteen's edited volume, *The Question of the Gift*, delve into many of these gaps. As Osteen observes, "Cheal does not stress, as does Lee Anne Fennell, the dialogic aspects of gift giving and receiving, whereby the selves interacting in such transactions are also reconfigured through them. Thus he ends up limiting both the range and the value of the gift and risks trivializing what he attempts to endorse."⁹¹

In addition, Cheal appears uninterested in what happens to gifts that are offered in the highly coded and ritualized contexts of the art world. Our position is different: in an artwork, the gift qua tie-sign becomes ambivalent. Obviously, de Groot's offering of the Polaroid frames the encounter as something that was genuinely shared between the artist and the participant. But a little less obvious is the way in which this same act helps to confirm the moral economies—the prestation rites and rituals—that lend institutional prestige to participatory artworks and the artists that make them.⁹² To the

⁹¹ See Mark Osteen, "Introduction: Questions of the Gift," in Osteen, ed. *The Question of the Gift: Essays across disciplines* (New York: Routledge, 2002): 17.

⁹² Marcel Mauss's well-known and much debated early thesis—that while gifts may appear to be offered voluntarily, "in fact they are given and repaid under obligation" (*The Gift*, 1970: 1)—remains the ur-source in contemporary discussions (whether anthropological, sociological, art-critical, or otherwise) about the enfranchising potential of gift-giving. Mark Clintberg has surveyed much of the literature that pertains to debates surrounding the social efficacy of the gift in relational art, in "Commodified

degree that they come to be articulated within the “art field” (as Bourdieu’s work has defined it), such acts and appraisals of generosity, however subtle or compromising they may be, cannot be easily separated from the symbolic value that our culture bestows upon works of art.⁹³ Given this ambivalence in de Groot’s gesture, it is no surprise that the Polaroids themselves acquire a duplicitous value, signifying as both genuine mementos *and* as tokens of an ideological formation.

A bona fide artwork commissioned by a national cultural institution for a cultural festival with a large advertising budget, *Portraits de clients* was tethered, not to the family as a social institution (as is the case with gift-giving at Christmas time), but to the modern art museum, to its associated institutions, and to the repertoire of identities that they prescribe. Although inalienable in one respect—in the sense that it remains associated with the person of the giver long after it has changed hands—the Polaroid, signed on the back by the artist, also obtains to cultural property.

The problematic nature of this situation, and of the role that relationality plays therein, is further conveyed by the Polaroid portraits displayed in *Casting*, and the way in which this installation narratively re-frames the bank intervention as a kind survey of the audience’s actions and behaviours. What is the effect of finding “my Polaroid” (by Pablo) in a museum collection? More broadly yet, one might consider the instability of the Polaroid portraits—their mobility and polyvalence as cultural artifacts, as well as

Generosity and Relational Abductions: The Multiples of Felix Gonzales-Torres” (MA Thesis, Concordia University, 2008).

⁹³ Pierre Bourdieu describes the art field as a shifting network of forces comprising a range of social actors, each struggling to secure access to a limited pool of resources through the accumulation and exchange of symbolic capital. See Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

the way they narrate a certain *dépaysement*—as exemplifying de Groot’s posture of criticality *vis-à-vis* the culture of the museum. This instability as I have understood and embraced it within the performance of the gift has the potential for ruinous stability.

9. Un-mastery in *Portraits de clients*

Raphaëlle de Groot appears to employ “blind” and collaborative drawing in *Portraits de clients* for various reasons: to “provoke a state of dislocation” in her own subjective experience and in her assumed role as an artist; to incite voyeurism and at the same time prompt gallery visitors to question their role as viewers; to elaborate an image of the artist that interrupts what she calls “la figure ‘forte’ de l’artiste—celle du créateur au regard privilégié et autorisé qui livre en surplomb son expression personnelle du monde.”⁹⁴ De Groot doesn’t want to replace this figure so much as displace and transform it in compelling ways: for instance, by appealing to listening (as opposed to seeing), and by incorporating strategies of participation in the unfolding of the work.

I have already alluded to some of these features of “un-mastery” in my discussion of the *punctum*, as well as in the related idea of phantasy as a “mise-en-scène of desire.” Critics of a Lacanian bent might extend this analysis of un-mastery by appealing to the figure of the phantasm: to its effectivity as a conduit for “the gaze,” which returns to me an image of myself as a subject-object captured in the projected field of the Other’s vision. As Kaja Silverman reminds us, in this context, “to ‘be’ is in effect to ‘be

⁹⁴ R. de Groot, “En Exercice: Mise à l’épreuve de la figure de l’artiste dans un contexte d’exposition à travers une pratique interactive de la performance” (MFA thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2006), 1.

seen’.”⁹⁵ Alternately, should one judge the semiotic underpinnings of this approach to be limited in the face of the work’s appeal to “the fully embodied nature of intersubjectivity” (to borrow Amelia Jones’s phrase), one may equally align the figure of the phantasm with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the “flesh”—“flesh” being, for Merleau-Ponty, allusive of a sort of pellicle of being “which is not a thing but a possibility, a latency,”—a “concretion of visibility” in the ontological field where seer and seen are intertwined.⁹⁶ As is well known, Lacan’s and Merleau-Ponty’s theories emerged in dialogue with one another in France in the 1950s. They attempted to give the lie to the Cartesian conceit of “a supposedly disembodied viewer ... who can still retain the illusion of authority attached to the pure mind.”⁹⁷ In this sense, they jibe quite well with de Groot’s attempt to implicate visitors in the unfolding of the work, as well as to put her own artistic subjectivity under pressure.

The next scenario of un-mastery that I would like to explore is slightly different, however. It concerns the apparent superposition, in de Groot’s performative gestures, of the site where an artwork is normally made (the artist’s studio) and the usual site of its public reception (the gallery or museum). The best example of this sort of displacement remains the month-long intervention *En exercice* (2006). A highly experimental “exercise,” *En exercice* was a work in which the artist was present in the gallery and in

⁹⁵ Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 133. Lacan develops the concept of the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

⁹⁶ Amelia Jones, “Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology in Art History,” in *Art and Thought*, eds. by Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 75; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, eds. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 394-395.

⁹⁷ Jones, “Meaning, Identity, Embodiment,” 74.

which she adopted and tested a variety of physical constraints—“blind” drawing, encumbering objects, the unseeing use of a gymnastic rope-and-pulley system—with the aim of pushing her artistic posture of un-mastery to an exhaustive (and exhausted) limit.⁹⁸

When de Groot explains her gesture, she lingers over how the exercise was meant to exhibit the artist at work, and to make a work out of the work of making. In this context, de Groot cites two paintings “où le peintre *crée* une image du peintre *en train de créer*.”⁹⁹ These are Johannes Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting* (c. 1666) and Rembrandt’s *The Artist in his Studio* (c. 1629). What intrigues her about these works is how they index a certain logic of inversion (“Vermeer nous présente le dos du peintre et Rembrandt le dos d’une toile”), while casting the viewer imaginatively into the space between the artist and his work. “Comme *En exercice*, ils renversent la perspective pour donner présence à un intervalle et nous situer exactement dans l’espace de la création, au coeur même du *projet* de l’artiste.”¹⁰⁰ This is the space in which de Groot mines the effects of theatricality and audience participation.

⁹⁸ R. de Groot, “En Exercice: Mise à l’épreuve de la figure de l’artiste,” 28.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original). Cf. Déry, *L’Engagement*, 27-33. In this text, Louise Déry describes Paul-Emile Borduas’s “oeuvre d’artiste”—which comprises his writing and his teaching, in contrast to his isolated and mythologized pictorial *oeuvre*—as the genuine legacy of his social engagement, as an artist, in debates about the construction of identity in Quebec. This artistic project of political insertion, she continues, was “revitalized” by the feminist poets that rose to prominence in Quebec in the 1970s (“Paradoxalement, c’est en quittant ce ‘nous’ du *nous petit peuple* pour un ‘moi, je’ de femme, que les quêtes d’identité ... s’élargissent et prennent du relief”). Déry’s support of what de Groot calls her own “projet d’artiste” suggests, I believe, an attempt to keep alive this avenue of political engagement, albeit in a new and increasingly media-saturated social context.

En exercice evolved in that ambiguous space between the production of a work and its presentation. Many visitors, it seems, expected a clearer distinction between making and exhibiting, and *En exercice* (like *Portraits de clients*, which adopted the same model of the installation-as-work-site) frustrated that expectation. One might even say that *Portraits* emphasized this by casting the visitor in the role of artist, only to take the presumed agency of the artist away through the disabling mechanisms of the exercise. “Donc moi, je ne voyais pas, mais la personne avait cette difficulté à décrire un visage. ... On travaillait tous les deux dans cette situation de manque, comme en déficit, par rapport à l’image d’un visage.”¹⁰¹ In its cultural significations, the (SX-70) Polaroid image is marked by a similar ambivalence: it is caught between interpretations of its immediacy as a symbol of narcissistic identification (the antecedent of today’s cult of immediacy), and the belief that, as a (now) obsolete technology, it might serve as a reminder of modernity’s suppressed contradictions.¹⁰²

Handling the Polaroid, turning the object from front to back, extends the possibility of a plurality of interpretations. The first thing I notice is the opaque black square above the artist’s signature, which I imagine as a play on the “masking” of the image, but which in reality is the final backing layer of the picture: a trap for chemicals and light; a dark room—another “scene”—recessed within a white border and ballasted by the artist’s signature. This dark square reminds us of what, after the introduction of the SX-70 in 1972-73, arguably became the most popular feature of the Polaroid process, namely, its elimination of the darkroom. After this, “all Polaroid cameras

¹⁰¹ See note 7.

¹⁰² See Peter Buse, “Photography Degree Zero: A Cultural History of the Polaroid Image,” *New Formations* 62 (2007): 29-44.

dispensed with the need to pass photos through the public realm (or through a private lab). This short-circuiting of the conventional path of development, perhaps even more than instantaneity, has given Polaroid its meaning(s).”¹⁰³

To de Groot’s short-circuiting of the studio, we can add the Polaroid’s short-circuiting of the darkroom: two different kinds of inversions. Unfortunately, it is precisely this element—symbolized, for me, by the back of the picture—that is suppressed when the Polaroids are exhibited in the museum. In the bank it was still possible to handle the pictures. That is no longer the case in the museum. Demoted from three-dimensional objects to two-dimensional ones and placed under Plexiglas, the *Portraits de clients* Polaroids are well on their way to becoming mere images, indistinguishable from other kinds of photographic objects in a digital world. Presented as a set, they shed the intervention’s dealings with embodiment by appealing to a distanced and discriminating mode of vision.

10. My Polaroid as a “threshold of vision”

I want now to return to “my” Polaroid, the one I left with after visiting the *Making Real/Rendre réel* exhibition. In particular, I want to draw attention to the sculpted and coloured-on mask that is represented in this picture. David Tomas uses the phrase, “thresholds of vision,” to describe among other things the peculiarity of J. M. W. Turner’s coach drawings (c. 1820s). According to Tomas, what makes Turner’s sketches “thresholds of vision” is a function of how they record and signal towards a particular situation (a man drawing inside a coach travelling across a landscape), such

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 38.

that it is experienced against the grain of dominant (e.g. positivistic) models of vision.¹⁰⁴

The idea that cultural artifacts can function as “thresholds of vision” helps me to understand better how the masks operate in de Groot’s intervention—namely, as simultaneously archiving and mediating between alternate (now haptic, now optical) models of vision. In addition, Tomas’s schema can help us seize upon one of the more overlooked aspects of my Polaroid photograph—the area that is almost totally blown out (abstracted by) by the intensity of the flash—and to treat it as staging a comparable “threshold of vision.” Yet by placing an emphasis on haptic experience, and by isolating individual cultural objects for attention, Tomas’s schema tells us very little about what the photographs mean and how they come to signify *as an ensemble*. Nor does it reveal very much about the relationship these images might have to other, similar kinds of images circulating in the art world.

Turner’s drawings are treated by Tomas as a very unusual kind of technical object. The products of a strange “imaging machine,” comprising a road, a carriage, and a hand-held pencil’s errant tracings on a page, they are interesting in part because they elude “retrospective analysis.” According to Tomas, this interpretative resistance contrasts sharply with the technical imaging devices invented by Charles Babbage around the same time to identify and analyze inconsistencies in the way that railway cars travelled. While Turner’s coach drawings exhibit a large degree of referential ambiguity, which untethers seeing from processes of identification, Babbage’s

¹⁰⁴ Tomas, *Beyond the Image Machine*, 13-40.

inventions helped to align vision with scientific systems of prediction and quantification.

What seems to make my Polaroid a threshold of vision, by contrast, concerns not only the drawing exercise—itsself comparable to a kind of “imaging machine”—but also its conjugation by a number of other factors. These include: the contingencies of the portrait situation (how close I stepped to de Groot before snapping the shutter); the technical specs of the camera; and the photograph’s gradual decay over time, a process exacerbated by where and how I keep it, and so forth. The life of the Polaroid, which I have falsely arrested with a digital scan, becomes an exemplar and a literalization of this concept of the “imaging machine,” which continues to mark the mask of the client whose details I find increasingly difficult to see.

For Tomas, a cultural theorist and historian of technology, cultural artifacts like Turner’s coach drawings are significant as object lessons that allow us to linger over a kind of history that “does not figure prominently in conventional histories of art or in the history of western representation in general.”¹⁰⁵ Like Barthes’s attempt to develop a *mathesis singularis* for the photographic object in *Camera Lucida* (a text often cited by Tomas), this is essentially a history that is responsive to how “the sense of touch can not only create the possibilities of knowledge,” but also “transform the object of knowledge itself.”¹⁰⁶ From her earliest projects with latex (the *Bain public* action, 1996), body imprints (*Reconnaissance*, 1997), and pâte de sel (*Colin-maillard*, 1999-2001), to her later performative projects, where, as she says, she willingly becomes “une matière à modeler,” de Groot has developed techniques like “blind” and

¹⁰⁵ Tomas, *Beyond the Image Machine*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

collaborative drawing that produce perturbing oscillations and encounters between regimes of vision and regimes of touch.¹⁰⁷ For Tomas, it is precisely these sorts of disturbances that have the capacity to alter our apprehension of an object, scrambling the organization of its qualities and its sense, and thereby opening new possibilities for critical and historical inquiry.

Whether we see this aspect of de Groot's *oeuvre* as setting up alternative conditions for analyzing the significance of photographic objects is a question of perspective. After all, my training as a photographic historian makes these not alternate routes, but freeways to interpretation. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how the materiality of an SX-70 Polaroid can bring the interplay between vision and tactility to our attention. Tomas himself has denigrated the Polaroid process for popularizing, in a manner not seen since Kodak's famous 1888 slogan "You Press the Button We Do The Rest," the modern subservience of the hand to the demands of vision.¹⁰⁸ But my photograph (in spite of its diverse functions as an agent of territorialization) continues to appeal to the hand. It has a certain weight about it—a function, no doubt, of the picture's multiple layers, its robust matting, and of the mysterious dyes and developing chemicals expressed from the 'pod' that protrudes like a blister from the base of the picture. (I am reminded of de Groot's use of and visualization of *sebum* in *Reconnaissance*). Polaroid images are brought to vision *slowly, in the palm of one's hand* even (not on a screen), and often in the company of others. Shaking them while they developed used to be a ritual (it had no effect). Whereas archivally they were first

¹⁰⁷ De Groot, "En Exercice. Mise à l'épreuve de la figure de l'artiste," 1.

¹⁰⁸ David Tomas, "Mimesis and the Death of Difference in the Graphic Arts," *SubStance* 22: 1 (1993): 49.

touted as highly permanent (the dyes), then impermanent (the plastic), culturally they have been figured as small objects that lend themselves to fetishistic overvaluation (miniatures). And yet, the ease and fun with which they are produced invests them with the quality of other throw-away objects. The fact that one didn't have to take them down the street to be developed favoured illicit and intimate acts of picture-making.¹⁰⁹ Daniel Boudinet's *Polaroid*, which served as the frontispiece to the original French and English printings of *Camera Lucida*—the same Polaroid that has been said to be “a central, perhaps even *the* central, image in Barthes's argument”—was also reportedly judged by Barthes as being “thin, there's not enough there.”¹¹⁰ Where do these features and gestures come from? Where do they take us? What affects and sense ratios do these details tap into? What stories do they enable us to compose, seek out, and call up?

11. Fetish, factish

In his 1927 essay on “Fetishism” Freud grounded his concept of the fetish on the idea that boys perceived and were disturbed by the supposed absence of the female phallus. In order to cope with the fear of castration provoked by this experience, the boy's interest, he suggested, migrates from one site of phantasy (the female genitals) to another—usually an object or body part found in the genitals' spatial, temporal, or semantic vicinity—effectively “covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of

¹⁰⁹ Peter Buse has discussed many of these elements in detail, in “Photography Degree Zero,” (2007) and “Surely Fades Away,” *Photographies* 1: 2 (2008): 221-238.

¹¹⁰ Geoffrey Batchen, “Palinode,” in Batchen, ed. *Photography Degree Zero*, 16, 26n42.

nothing.”¹¹¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, critics began to draw on this interpretation to argue that photographs derive their unique power as fetishes in part from their material contiguity to the past, to a “that has been” of which they are a fragmentary part and which they evince as being both phantasmatically present and irrecoverably lost.¹¹²

Polaroid photographs, in particular, may be regarded as exemplifying the displacements and disavowals of fetishism, not so much because they objectify a past reality (though they can do that too), but more so because over time they have become invested with meanings and histories of use that render them, to borrow Geoffrey Batchen’s term, “doubly indexical.” In other words, Polaroids can be valued not only as visual traces of the past *that can be seen*, but also as metonymic samples of the photographed event *that can be held and touched*.¹¹³ Of course all photographs can be held and touched, but what is significant about the Polaroid generated by *Portraits de clients* (my Polaroid, for instance) is its metonymic association *as an object* (rather than a representation) to the performed event; in this sense, the Polaroids are like material shards orbiting around the memory of the ephemeral intervention.

¹¹¹ Laura Mulvey, “Some Notes on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture,” *October* 65 (Summer 1993): 11.

¹¹² See, for instance, Christian Metz’s melancholic reading of the photographic fetish in “Photography and Fetish,” *October* 34 (1985): 81-90. To be clear, this does not imply that one’s captivation by a photograph makes one clinically a fetishist; rather, as Victor Burgin observes, “what is being remarked is that photographic representation accomplishes that separation of knowledge from belief which is characteristic of fetishism.” Burgin, “Photography, Phantasy, Function,” in *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), 190.

¹¹³ Geoffrey Batchen develops the concept of double indexicality as it applies to photographic objects in “Ere the substance fade: Photography and hair jewellery,” in Elizabeth Hart and Janice Edwards, eds. *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (New York: Routledge 2004), 41. Susan Stewart attributes the notion of the metonymic sample to Umberto Eco, who also refers to it as a “partial double,” in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1985), 136.

Characterizing my attachment to the Polaroid as fetishistic provides a kind of vocabulary, a way of speaking about *Portraits de clients* that figures it as meaningful. For if the intervention returned to me an image of myself poor in mastery, what the Polaroid seems to afford in the aftermath of the intervention is a displacement and disavowal of what in my “original” experience, by the count of knowledge, was not. In other words, the significance of the event is formed retroactively. At the same time, and not unrelatedly, my attachment also serves here as an indication that *something* is being covered up, that some “residual knowledge” of what is being secreted by the fetishistic logic of belief, remains.¹¹⁴ This applies at the level of memory and sensation as well: with the advent of my Polaroid as fetish, the disturbing ‘tear’ that the phantasm provokes (in the field of vision, or in the identificatory projections of the beholder) is progressively sewn back up, but without ever being completely covered over.¹¹⁵

Interpretatively the fetish-function of the Polaroid appears to locate my attachment satisfyingly within the affective economy of the artwork. That is, my attachment neatly confirms the idea of the intervention’s alienating effects, and vice-versa. Even if sketchily, this suggests that fetishism, as a function of identification, is a very productive concept for describing and understanding the effects that *Portraits de clients* might have on its viewers. At the same time, if there’s any fit between these two postures (of identification and alienation), this fit is retroactive, teleological—strongly

¹¹⁴ Mulvey, “Some Notes on Theories of Fetishism,” 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* According to Mulvey, beyond “substituting for the thing thought missing,” and beyond “covering over and disavowing the traumatic sight of nothing,” the fetish “also commemorates.” “It is in this [last] sense,” she explains, “that the fetish fails to lose touch with its original traumatic real and continues to refer back to the moment in time to which it bears witness, to its own historical dimension.”

motivated on my part on account of my own attachment to the object.¹¹⁶ It is, in other words, fetishistic. And nothing could be further from what is proffered by de Groot's bank intervention, which values, precisely, the inadequacy, or *écart*, between an idealized image that precipitates from words on one hand, and its actual, messy, manifestation as a drawing on the other. Curiously, then, a psychoanalytic theory of fetishism proves to be both a very adequate and very inadequate tool for describing the patterning of meaning in *Portraits de clients*.

Other theories of the fetish might be useful here. Regarding the Polaroids as “factish” objects enmeshed in networks of attachments helps us better understand their capacity to “make” us do things that we would not otherwise do—and this not in a deterministic, but in a quasi-causal sort of way. According to Bruno Latour, the linguistic category of the “middle voice”¹¹⁷ can help us steer the terms of critical discourse away from questions of determination—of what *causes* us to act—and towards questions of affordance—of what, as Latour explains, *makes* us make other

¹¹⁶ Explained away as a potential effect of the work (of its rhetoric even), the fetish appears to return, maddeningly, at the level of its interpretation. Indeed, one may wonder how much the complementarity of these two “functions” (of the Polaroid on one hand, and the intervention on the other) makes a spectacle of theory, rather than describing the material conditions of the work. That is, one may wonder whether a classical theory of fetishism doesn't lock de Groot's project into “the ideal forms of causation, comprehension, or expression, rather than to the real process of production on which it depends.” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 24).

¹¹⁷ An example of middle voice would be ‘to sleep’, as opposed to ‘to put (someone) to sleep’ (active voice). Like the active and the passive voices, the middle voice designates an existential posture—it is something we ‘hear’, and consequently feel, in the way a sentence is presented and arranged. However, in contrast to the active and passive voices, which distribute the subject's position according to a dialectic of mastery, the middle voice posits the subject as a form-in-process, affected and transformed by the very movement that is its *doing*. The key text here (cited by Latour) is Émile Benveniste's “The Active and the Middle Voice in the Verb,” in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971), 145-171.

things do.¹¹⁸ In this context he develops the notion of the “factish” to describe those entities that “make us do.” A portmanteau word combining “fact” and “fetish,” “factish” refers to an obstinate register of things more than it does to actual objects; one might say that it refers to their noematic attributes—those qualities that are said less *of* things, than of what is given in the relation *between* things encountering each other in the world (e.g. the qualities/sensations that obtain in the relation between an object and its beholder). As such, “factishes” have a bearing on how we conceive the relationship between facts and beliefs, iconophilia and iconoclasm.

Raphaëlle de Groot’s “blind” drawing exercises provide an excellent example of the “middle voice” (that is, of the “factish”) in action. Applied to the domain of photographic experience, which is my main concern here, the concept of “factish” helps us better understand how the Polaroid “makes” me do things (affords me the possibility of doing things) that would not otherwise be done. Here, Latour’s schema starts to resemble Barthes’s *punctum* (“it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*”) without the important element of memory. It is in this sense that the snapshots from *Portraits de clients* can be conceived not only as visual records of an event but as quasi-causes, or events in holding. (Walter Benjamin’s touching description of Kafka’s studio portrait as a boy, which he refers to as a “pendant” to historical narratives of photography, may be read as such an event in holding.)¹¹⁹

Above, I suggested that the Polaroid had (for me) no *punctum*; without quite

¹¹⁸ Bruno Latour, “Facture/Fracture: From the Concept of Network to the Concept of Attachment,” *Res* (Autumn 1999): 20-31. Cf. Massumi’s explanation of the concept of “double becoming” in his article “Realer than Real” (see note 22).

¹¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 515-517.

contradicting this argument, Latour's analysis invites us to re-evaluate it. The idea of the "factish" shows us how pictures that lack a *punctum* might still be enmeshed in networks of attachments that go beyond issues of determination.

What does Latour mean by the "*faire-faire*" or "made to do"? He explains this odd formulation by recounting an anecdote about puppets. Puppeteers, he explains, often say that their puppets make them do the motions in their story, but what they really mean is that their doing is licensed (quasi-caused) by that aggregate of qualities that makes up the puppet's protean form: the figurine's colour, shape, and lighting; its particular feel and rhythm when in motion, and so on—these are all features that occasion the puppeteer's experience of the "made to do," and that is one way of understanding what he calls "factishes." De Groot explicitly positions herself as a passive (if unwieldy) drawing and shaping instrument in *Portraits de clients*; implicitly, the protocols of the exercise push the participants to move to the beat of a different drummer too. What I can neither imagine from the index card, nor verbally express during the drawing exercise, I gather and project using as my cues de Groot's questions and what is already there on the surface of the mask in front of me. The portrait unfolds in part intentionally, in part as if autopoietically. I have the sense in such moments that the drawing becomes its own model and point of reference, ascribing to me the role not of an author, but of *another* mediator.

12. *Portraits de clients* as a "metapicture"?

In his book, *Picture Theory*, W. J. T. Mitchell suggests that certain pictures, depending on their use and context, are capable "of providing a second-order discourse

that tells us—or at least shows us—something about pictures.”¹²⁰ These metapictures, as he calls them, are self-reflexive, and range in kind from popular cartoons, to the optical illusion of the “duck-rabbit,” to Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*. What unites such disparate objects as metapictures is their capacity to exacerbate what Michel Foucault called the “infinite relation” and mutual imbrication between language and visual experience.¹²¹ Related to this is the capacity of metapictures, when used as teaching aids, to “de-discipline” the boundaries that Western society maintains between vision and textuality. Metapictures are more effective at prompting questions than providing answers.

For Mitchell, one important feature of metapictures is their referential ambiguity, and the way in which this ambiguity exposes an indeterminacy in the self-identity of the viewer. Rather than conveying a stable meaning, metapictures tend to appear as visual paradoxes (e.g. the “duck-rabbit,” *Las Meninas*) whose perceptual or semantic play between different “aspects” has the effect of eliciting the projections of the beholder.

¹²⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 38. For Mitchell, “picture theory” is meant to act as an alternative to what he regards as the bias of semiotic approaches toward “textual/linguistic frameworks” (99n31). One of the limitations of Mitchell’s idea of metapictures is that it doesn’t give a sufficiently robust account of why we subjectivize images as he suggests we should or already do. This, I take it, is related to the overall problem of the fetish—of how we conceive or expose ourselves to the agency of images. See Mitchell’s “What do Pictures Really Want?,” *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 71-82, where the author asks readers to merely suspend their enlightened disbelief in the capacity of images to desire, and to speak.

¹²¹ Discussing the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard, among others, Gary Shapiro explains how the “infinite relation” that obtains between word and image—especially when staged in moments of ekphrasis—can prompt us “to ask what we are doing when we think we are verbalizing a visual work.” In “The Absent Image: Ekphrasis and the ‘Infinite Relation’ of Translation,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6: 1 (2007): 20. Foucault’s account of the “infinite relation” appears in *Order of Things* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

As Mitchell explains, such metapictures serve as “an invitation to the spectator to return with fascination to the mysterious object whose identity seems so mutable and yet so absolutely singular and definite.”¹²²

Mitchell’s phrasing here—his *so ... and yet ...* —is meant, I presume, to indicate how it is that such pictures get to be so captivating. But it also reminds me of something that Louise Déry wrote about the “daunting paradox” expressed in de Groot’s artistic process, especially in her performative exercises:

On one hand is the inescapable profusion of the material to encompass, authentic and sincere, daring and prolix, that generously lets itself be thought about, makes itself open and opening, indeed expansive and welcoming. Such a wealth of meanings and intentions offered to perception and reflection has a good chance of satisfying the spectators who wish to measure themselves against an artistic process often considered difficult to grasp, just as it can allow to be fulfilled, at least in part, the legitimate expectation of the gaze, athirst for meaning, that will draw near to one of thought’s last refuges today: art. On the other hand, experiencing Raphaëlle de Groot’s work produces a destabilizing effect, commands a moment’s retreat, drives us to the safety of the trenches, acts in such a way that we end up with few words to express it properly, to manifest its profusion, to comment on its expressive force, to convey its fundament.¹²³

Certainly, this antinomy—between the seductive power of de Groot’s work “on one hand,” and its muting effects “on the other”—is a rhetorical flourish, performed by a writer confronted by the task of “convey[ing] the conceptual ductility” of the work.¹²⁴ It provides Déry (and, by extension, her readers) with an organizing principle (disunity,

¹²² Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 48.

¹²³ Louise Déry, “The Exhibition as Exercise,” in *Raphaëlle de Groot. En exercice*, ed. Louise Déry (Montreal: Galerie de l’UQÀM, 2006), 24.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

tension) that helps to bring out what is most attractive and beguiling about de Groot's performative interventions: namely, their intrigue. I have been doing something similar by seeking out the tension between the intervention and the Polaroid. But what I want to underline here is how Déry's dilemma also seems to locate the artist's process in the neighbourhood of the metapicture. This is confirmed in *Portraits de clients*, which, after all, like many of de Groot's performative interventions, appears quite literally to stage postmodern theory's concentration on the problematic relationship between words and pictures, mastery and un-mastery.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the phantasm appears to act as both hook and hinge in this situation. It is *hook*, in the sense that its ambiguity serves to bait attention, inciting attempts that will always fail to pin down the sense of its object; perplexed by this gaze inhering in the mask, which "sees" us, we ask whether that is de Groot addressing us or the client, or whether it was just our senses playing a trick. More often than not, in de Groot's work, this equivocal effect is of the order of the fantastic. The phantasm is *hinge*, in the sense that it leverages, however fleetingly, a phenomenological and experiential analysis of the intertwined relation of seer and seen, subject and object. And this can (at least potentially) unsettle the self-image of the artist, the participant, and other gallery visitors. As Mitchell says of the duck-rabbit drawing, if this "image always asks, 'what am I [now]?' or 'how do I look [to you now]?', the answer depends on the observer asking the same questions."¹²⁵ A word that Mitchell uses to describe this back-and-forth movement is multistability, which he defines as a quality displayed by certain pictures that have a high degree of referential ambiguity, potentially

¹²⁵ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 48.

transforming them into “a kind of mirror for the beholder, or a screen for self-projection.”¹²⁶

This play with equivocation in the phantasm can rub off on the Polaroids too. Two pictures are produced by each encounter, and they are not identical. The official Polaroid has its double—but which is which? Is the official Polaroid the one I have been presenting differentially here as “my Polaroid,” or is it instead the one that is exhibited under Plexiglas during *Casting*? These sorts of questions can have a bearing on our understanding of the relationship of this work to the institutions of museology and museography. In terms of the ‘real,’ which one is the ‘real’ or genuine work of art? The split trajectories of the Polaroids make us aware of the point of view from which we narrate and remember the intervention. These questions become all the more insistent when one takes into account how the extant documentation of this work (including that presented in *Casting*) appears to make no reference to the fact that there were, indeed, two Polaroids that were produced: two unique objects, two originals.

It would be easy and useful to carry this interpretation over to the ekphrasis of the individual *Portraits de clients* Polaroids, whose ritual function as mementos endows them with the capacity to prompt comparable bouts of verbosity. As Mitchell states, “any picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures is a metapicture.”¹²⁷ However, my Polaroid is not just any picture, but many pictures, whose function and characteristics shift in virtue of this singular object’s passage through different and sometimes overlapping cultural contexts. For instance, while it is true that it is a picture of a picture (i.e. of the mask), it is also true that the Polaroid is a token. As such, its

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

agency rests less on the content of the image than on its significance as the trace of a shared experience.

13. Collecting

In an urban intervention titled *Collecte de poussière* (2001), Raphaëlle de Groot set out to collect bits of dust and other minutia that had gathered in the cracks and surfaces of the cobblestones of Cabot Square, a busy and historically charged public square in downtown Montreal.¹²⁸ She arranged these traces in neat lines in a large book that she left open for others to see. This process is reminiscent of scientific fieldwork, but it seems to have been as arbitrary as it appeared methodical. With a pencil she identified the name of the site and the time of the take above each line. Each line was set down below the one preceding it, like in a log. Meanwhile, in a move that echoes certain of her “blind” portraits, de Groot made notes, from memory, of the reactions and exchanges she had with passers-by.¹²⁹

In *8 x 5 x 363 + 1* (2002-2006), this interest in gathering what gathers in the cracks is transposed onto the plane of vision and of language in the context of an operating textile factory in Biella, Italy. As part of this extensive interdisciplinary project, de Groot developed a complex system of communication involving cards and

¹²⁸ *Collecte de poussière* formed part of the off-site exhibition project *Gestes d'artistes/Artist's Gestures*. Marie Fraser and Marie-Josée Lafortune, *Gestes d'artistes/Artist's Gestures* (Montreal: Optica, 2003).

¹²⁹ Such written musings figure prominently, for instance, in the museum installation, *Tous ces visages*, where they were presented in index cards in a manner that signaled a tension between the artist's and the participants' experience of the “blind” drawing intervention. See especially the photographic documentation in Raphaëlle de Groot, “Tous ces visages,” in Raphaëlle de Groot (artist's website), accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.raphaeldegroot.net/>.

cameras in order to navigate the sensorial conditions of the site, as well as her role as a stranger in that situation.

L'initiative impliquait une résidence de six mois au sein de l'usine de cet établissement, lieu de la production des tissus. Pour communiquer avec les ouvriers dans cet environnement bruyant, j'ai utilisé un système de fiches et des boîtes aux lettres que j'ai installées dans chacun des départements. La première fiche, distribuée en main propre à tous les travailleurs, proposait de choisir une couleur pour peindre ces boîtes. D'autres fiches ont ensuite suivi, chacune posant des questions différentes aux ouvriers. J'ai finalement remplacé ce système par des appareils photo jetables que les travailleurs pouvaient rapporter chez eux. Chaque appareil (une quarantaine en tout) était identifié par une question préalablement recueillie auprès des ouvriers. Ainsi, mes interlocuteurs étaient invités à faire une photographie pour répondre aux interrogations de leurs collègues.¹³⁰

The pictures were then exhibited alongside collections of other traces that presented a picture of the system of the intervention. This happened twice; first at the factory, and later at Galerie de l'UQÀM as part of the exhibition *En Exercice*. Presented on the gallery's walls in vertical lines of different lengths, the snapshots show mundane scenes related to individuals' everyday lives—scenes that de Groot's intervention and installation worked to locate within an alternative economy of communication in the workplace.¹³¹

In both of these projects, de Groot used easily overlooked traces to index the affective, as well as the political, dynamics that lend significance to these sites. The viewer who comes to the work after the fact is invited to imagine these actions through

¹³⁰ De Groot, "8 x 5 x 363 + 1," in Déry, ed. *Raphaëlle de Groot. En exercice* (2006), 92-93.

¹³¹ Uzel, "L'Usine comme transformateur social: 8 x 5 x 363 + 1," *Parachute* 122 (April-June, 2006).

a cognitive process similar to what the anthropologist of art, Alfred Gell, calls ‘abduction’. As Gell explains, ‘abduction’ is a technical term derived from logic and theorized in semiotics (especially by Umberto Eco). In this context, it refers to a cognitive operation—more specifically, “a mode of inference”—that is exercised when one is attempting to capture the meaning of something that in all respects appears to be a sign while not easily betraying what it is a sign of (e.g. marks in the snow that could either be animal tracks, or a special pattern caused by melting); ‘abduction’ is the name that both Gell and Eco give to this kind of semantic effort.¹³² What I want to suggest is that *Portraits de clients* and *Casting* use photographs similarly, inviting the viewer to hazard inferences about the events instigated by the work—namely about the relation that obtained between gallery visitors and the performing artist, but also about the place of the client in the intervention. On one hand, *Portraits de clients* aimed to generate an experience whose duration may or may not be extended by the photographic object (some participants may have thrown their image-objects away); on the other hand, de Groot used photographs to construct a survey of that experience (she holds on to her findings). This survey-like attitude is already evident in the repetitiveness of de Groot’s gesture, in her function as a kind of host, and in her use of the Polaroids as tokens of appreciation.

In the intervention *En exercice*, de Groot used a video camera to record her gesture. With the help of assistants, she encouraged visitors (many of them student groups) to pass the camera among themselves and to record her uncanny transforming

¹³² Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14. As I mentioned, Gell bases his idea of the “abduction of social agency” in part on Umberto Eco’s definition of semantic abduction. See Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan), 40.

figure. The footage that was thus gathered would then be projected in the same gallery setting. But de Groot used these videos for her own re-viewing purposes, too. In the process of drafting the written component of her MFA thesis, she referred to the videos as “visual notes” of the exercise.¹³³ One might consider the Polaroid portraits in *Portraits de clients* similarly, as scriblings that collect on the margins of the gesture (during the installation), and whose paths later diverge: half of them subsequently becoming divorced from their locus of production (distributed as mementos, they are potentially inserted into new collections), while the other half is transformed into cultural property, the very material of a future installation (*Casting*). The function of the Polaroids as visual notes seems congruent with some of Tomas’s ideas of transcultural space because they are contingent, personal, and often (though not always) insignificant in comparison to what we are often taught to regard as the semantic or affective thrust of a relational gesture.

Taking a step back from these observations allows us to see these techniques in light of de Groot’s interest in collecting, observation, and procedures of ethnographic, forensic, and archaeological research. As de Groot states, part of her aim in working “in the field”—in specific sites and social contexts—is not merely to collect traces of human activity, but to create situations that involve the other “dans un processus où il est amené à produire un signe, une marque, un récit.”¹³⁴ Indeed, de Groot’s tendency to collect, to organize, to rearrange, and to construct eccentric readings of the data she

¹³³ De Groot, “En Exercice. Mise à l’épreuve de la figure de l’artiste,” 2.

¹³⁴ De Groot, “L’autre comme contrée à explorer,” 123.

gathers as part of her projects and interventions, has led many critics to invoke those ethnographic and anthropological methods in which collecting is a key component.¹³⁵

Sylvie Fortin, an instructor in the Doctorat en étude et pratique des arts (the interdisciplinary PhD program at UQÀM) discusses how the collection of ethnographic material (“*collecte de données ethnographiques*”) can become “une opération charnière” in the methodological approaches of students conducting interdisciplinary projects in research-based artistic practice.¹³⁶ While not leading to ethnographic studies (“*études ethnographiques*”) *per se*, such acts of collecting, she suggests, allow for a reflexive analysis of students’ immediate cultural terrain, be it “the studio, the workshop, the classroom, or the community.”¹³⁷ Implicit in this approach is a critical awareness of the artist-researcher’s historically and discursively situated subject-position:

La crise de la représentation, loin de voir la description comme un simple exercice de transcription et d’adéquation entre les mots et la réalité, impose fermement la présence et la subjectivité du chercheur jusqu’à faire de celui-ci l’objet central dans les études autoethnographiques. En effet, si la personne qui mène l’investigation est indissociable de la production de recherche, pourquoi alors ne pas observer l’observateur? Pourquoi ne pas se regarder soi-même et écrire à partir de sa propre expérience?¹³⁸

Transposed into the critical terrain of post-1960s art, whose relation to the artist’s status as author remains ambivalent at best, such an emphasis on the artist’s “self” may

¹³⁵ Leblanc provides the best account of this aspect of de Groot’s practice, in “La relation comme espace de négociation,” 56-71.

¹³⁶ Sylvie Fortin, “Apports possibles de l’ethnographie et de l’autoethnographie pour la recherche en pratique artistique,” in Pierre Gosselin and Éric Coguiéc, eds. *La recherche création: pour une compréhension de la recherche en pratique artistique* (Montreal: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2006), 100.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 98 (author’s translation).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

lead, as I think it does in the case with de Groot's work, to the adoption of an ethnographic stance inflected with elements of auto-critique. That would be one way of explaining de Groot's adoption of "blind" drawing as a relational technique, as well as the shift in her practice from her collecting projects (*Dévoilements* and *Colin-maillard* in particular), to her later, and in some cases, very spectacular, performative interventions.¹³⁹

Thus described, this trajectory makes evident de Groot's gradual assumption of her (increasingly institutionally valorized) artistic persona, but in a manner that is checked by her implication in and transformation through the systems, collections, and collecting situations that she constructs. No longer merely a collector of ethnographic material (as it happened with *Dévoilements* and, to a lesser degree, with *Colin-maillard*), in her performative interventions she creates situations that transform her image into something that both she and others can handle, collect, and transform in turn. Many of these same problems have preoccupied me in the process of my own research,

¹³⁹ Hal Foster's 1995 essay, "The Artist as Ethnographer," is frequently cited by artists and critics implicated these debates. It is an essay that de Groot is familiar with. One of Foster's main points is that contemporary artists have often been misguided in their appropriation of ethnographic and anthropological frameworks, leading in many cases not to a critique but to a reproduction of cultural myths about the marginality of the other, and to a fortification of the artist's persona in a situation that is no longer structured by the dichotomy of centre and periphery. George E. Marcus has recently challenged Foster's argument on the grounds that it is, first, too sweeping in its accusations of bad faith; secondly, that it conveniently ignores what anthropologists can learn from artists (even from their mistakes), in their evolving experiments with new models of fieldwork; and, finally, that in its focus on site-specific installations it overlooks other artistic modes of presentation, such as theatre and film, that have equally borrowed from anthropology. See Marcus, "Affinities: Fieldwork in Anthropology Today and the Ethnographic in Artwork," in Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, eds., *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice* (New York: Berg, 2010), 85-87.

and I have tried to point in that direction in my analyses of the Barthesian *punctum* and the fetish.

Having said that, I would not want to overstate *Portraits de clients*'s connection to the emerging critical discourse about "art as research." It is true that de Groot has described her video exercises as "research."¹⁴⁰ It is also true that practically all of her performative interventions have been motivated by the idea of producing inscriptions and gathering traces that map the rituals associated with the cultural terrain of the contemporary art world—from the art school, to the university art gallery, to the museum, to the commercial gallery, to the off-site exhibition. And she has frequently invited 'professional spectators' (art historians, students, and critics, but also sociologists and occupational psychologists) to bring their expertise to the elaboration of her work.¹⁴¹ But unlike other endeavours of "art as research," the creator of *Portraits de clients* does not seek to reinsert her work back into the domain of the university. She leaves that to others. Nor could one easily place de Groot's preference for narrative and intersubjective aesthetic experience within discursive frames that value "concrete political concerns" over formal experimentation.¹⁴² And perhaps that's for the good.

¹⁴⁰ See Leah Sandals, "Quebec Puts On A New Face: Arts Cuts Turn the QC Red; Raphaëlle de Groot Interview Extra," *Unedit My Heart* (blog), August 29, 2008, http://neditpasmoncoeur.blogspot.com/2008_08_01_archive.html (accessed September 12, 2011).

¹⁴¹ The term, 'professional spectator,' is used by Amelia Jones and Andrew Melville in their "Introduction" to *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Melville (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁴² Tom Holert points to some of these discrepancies in "Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent," *Texte Zur Kunst* 82 (June 2011), 52. In particular, he refers to a tension between the "formalism of ... collaborative work," on one hand, and the "insistence on concrete political concerns," on the other. See also Holert, "Art in the Knowledge-Based Polis," *e-flux journal* 3 (February 2009): 10. http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_40.pdf (accessed September 12, 2011).

14. A logic of anticipation

One of the things that has most intrigued me about *Portraits de clients* is the way in which its implicit emulation of ethnographic and museological methods appeared to rehearse in advance my own attempts to situate and interpret de Groot's work critically, from my standpoint as a student of Art History. In this sense, the work has always seemed to be a step ahead of me. Michael Ann Holly's idea of "prefiguration" helped me to better understand this conjuncture between the protocols of the work, on one hand, and the protocols of my work on the other. In *Past Looking* (1996), Holly sets out to show how visual works of art, through their temporal and spatial organization, are able to affect individual art historians in such a way that, in retrospect, the same works may appear to "syntactically prefigure" their subsequent description and historical interpretation. For example, Holly argues that the Renaissance principles of perspective effectively "legislated and predicted" the rhetorical posture that Jacob Burckhardt adopted when writing his influential cultural history of that period.

Holly's preferred term for this sort of influence, "prefiguration," is consistent with the Freudian idea of *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action": in both cases, the source and the activity of the action—whether it rests within the subject or outside the subject, in the present or in the past—appear to be conflated.¹⁴³ The way that Raphaëlle de Groot goes about gathering and working with traces has always manifested strong affinities with this projective idea of temporality and causation. In a project such as *Collecte de poussière*, for instance, de Groot insinuates multiple temporalities in order

¹⁴³ Prefiguration is also commonly used in typological interpretations of the Bible. In this context, characters from the Old Testament are said to "prefigure" characters in the New Testament.

to intervene in the memory practices of the city.¹⁴⁴ *Portraits de clients*, too, is about the limits and hidden surprises of personal and bureaucratic regimes of memory. Holly's notion of "prefiguration" may provide a useful metahistorical framework for describing the anticipatory elements of de Groot's bank intervention. It is as if *Portraits de clients*, by dint of being about "the fate of remains," was rehearsing, in the past, the questions about interpretation and inscription that I would have to face—that I am now facing—when writing about it in the present.¹⁴⁵

However, although Holly's approach has affinities with so-called "melancholic" theories of photography, it does little to further our understanding of how the Polaroids in *Portraits de clients* effect and are affected by dynamics that are only marginally related to historiography. Any of us can talk about and reflect upon the value of these pictures differently; while Holly's schema might speak to me as a student of Art History, it misses out on the rhetorical inventiveness of those who might describe the pictures otherwise.¹⁴⁶

I would like to propose a final caveat. In his essay, "To Take Place, To Disappear," Patrice Loubier reminds us of the tendency in many participatory practices to adopt existing modes of social behaviour. Raphaëlle de Groot's practice of gathering

¹⁴⁴ Marie Fraser and Marie-Josée Lafortune, "Raphaëlle de Groot: Collecte de poussière," in *Gestes d'artistes/Artists' Gestures*, ed. Marie Fraser and Marie-Josée Lafortune (Montreal: Optica, 2003). In this interview, de Groot singles out for attention what seems like a model case of a (Freudian) traumatic encounter, as it was occasioned by her presence in the square collecting dust.

¹⁴⁵ The phrase, "the fate of remains," is a reference to a brief text of the same title ("*Le dessein des restes*") written by de Groot and published in *Esse* 66 (Summer 2009).

¹⁴⁶ Holly admits that the historian has the ability to choose how he or she responds to the artwork, whether positively or critically. But in the end, she says, the historian is *forced* to respond to it, and if not forced at least made indebted to it. And that is precisely the problem: Holly's argument does not, in my opinion, tell us anything about why it would be necessary to posit such a constraining schema in the first place.

data, and of producing unorthodox “readings” of it later on, is congruent with this observation. Taking these points on board, it is not too farfetched to suggest that part of the artistry of *Portraits de clients* resided in how this gesture might have emulated, in the eyes of its ‘professional spectators’, a number of the activities that mirror the tricks of our trade. The phantasm of the work may, in this case, be described as at once veiling and disclosing the phantasmatic underpinnings of a concept like prefiguration. In any case, it has been good company.

If what intrigues me here is *Portraits de clients*’s mirroring of the tricks by which art-critical and art-historical meanings are constructed, then this is due not least to the dubious coincidence of many of the artist’s methods with my own, at the crucial moment when I am struggling to gain some degree of mastery over them. The mise-en-scène emerging now is no longer bounded by the local and contingent effects of the work. It is historical and institutional. Though marginally, *Portraits de clients* is part of broader tendencies in current art that arguably continue the project of institutional critique in an era when ‘contemporary art’ has become inextricable from the knowledge and entertainment industries that socially validate it.¹⁴⁷ These tendencies are sometimes gathered under the label of “research-based art,” “art as research,” and “research creation”—new labels, as though the phenomenon were new. And many master’s courses in Art History now encourage experimentation and interdisciplinary methods of research, transcultural encounters of another kind.

¹⁴⁷ See Andrea Fraser "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44: 1 (September, 2005): 278–283.

In this vein, Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson remind us of the effect that performative and performance-based art has had on the autonomy of critics' discourse over the last fifty years. They write,

Since the 1960s, visual art practices, from body art to Minimalism, have opened themselves to the dimension of theatricality in such a way as to suggest that art critics and art historians might reassess our own practices of making meaning through an engagement with the processes of art production and art reception as *performative*. In this way, artistic meaning can be understood as enacted through interpretative engagements that are themselves performative in their intersubjectivity.¹⁴⁸

What I'm trying to suggest is that, beyond merely "prefiguring" the form of my discourse (the discourse I am grappling with as a student of Art History), one of the most concrete lessons that *Portraits de clients* can offer concerns the intensifying conjunction of artistic and scholarly modes of research. From this point of view it becomes clear that my own experience of the work can be neither easily separated from my own desire to learn Art History, nor from de Groot's desire to critically emulate museological strategies of collection and display.

How do I distinguish my learning process from that which is staged in de Groot's work—how do I take distance from it—while at the same time acknowledging that a certain isomorphism links the two events? I cannot.

¹⁴⁸ Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, "Introduction," 1.

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Appendix: Related works by Raphaëlle de Groot

This appendix is intended to supplement references in the thesis to a family of works created by Raphaëlle de Groot between 1998 and 2008. The catalogue is not exhaustive; works such as *Il volto interiore* (2007) and *Tous ces visages* (2007-8), which reprise the processes and objects of *Portraits de clients* have been omitted.

Dévoilements (1998-2001)

Drawing project

Dévoilements is an extended drawing project that involved members of the Religieuses Hospitalières de St-Joseph in Montreal. It was conducted over a four-month period, culminating in the production of a bookwork and an exhibition. The artist's book and exhibition are each made up of 72 "blind" line drawings, accompanied by fragments of text gleaned from conversations recorded by de Groot over the course of the drawing sessions with the sisters.

Dévoilements is preceded by, and in a sense emerges out of, de Groot's eight-month residency working with artifacts in the storehouse of the Musée des Hospitalières de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal. The mandate of the Musée is to preserve and exhibit the history of the Hospitalières de Saint-Joseph to a broader public. On a certain level, *Dévoilements* may be seen as speaking to the complexity of de Groot's encounter during this time with the bonds linking the nuns to the various objects in the storehouse.

Structurally, *Dévoilements* is organized around two different types of drawing sequences or actions: first, there are “blind” drawing sessions conducted with the sisters; secondly, there is a suite of memory drawings, which de Groot produced alone following the drawings sessions. It is important to note that de Groot had already begun to explore the possibilities of “blind” drawing and tracing in 1999 with *Lectures*.

Eight sisters participated in the drawing sessions. Most agreed to become involved only on the condition that their identity be protected; as a result, the sisters’ drawings are identified only by their initials. For the project, de Groot invited each woman to pick an object from the museum’s collection. During the one-on-one sessions that followed, each sister was instructed to make “blind” line drawings, essentially tracing a form without looking at the page while keeping their gaze fixed on the object ahead.¹⁴⁹ While the sisters did this, de Groot traced their portrait, using the same method.

The memory drawings show de Groot’s attempt to draw the sisters’ portraits again, but this time from memory and with her eyes closed. Working “blindly” and in private, de Groot made two or three drawings for every sister, spacing her attempts with several-day intervals. Compared to the others, the ‘eyes-closed’ memory drawings seem to have a distinctly different aim. One might say that they inscribe de Groot herself as yet another locus of memory, another horizon of experience, constituted by and within

¹⁴⁹ Some of the objects that the nuns drew included a ‘*couronne de profession*’ (a crown of thorns), a doll dressed in nun’s clothing, and a small statue of Saint Joseph holding baby Jesus. See “Raphaëlle de Groot,” Canadian Centre for Contemporary Art, The Canadian Art Database: Artist Profiles, accessed September 12, 2011, http://www.ccca.ca/artists/artist_info.html?languagePref=en&link_id=9408&artist=Rapha%EBlle+de+Groot; and Raphaëlle de Groot, “*Dévoilements*,” accessed September 12, 2011, <http://www.raphaelledegroot.net/>.

the parameters of the project. This reflexive gesture seems especially significant given the documentary thrust of *Dévoilements*. The memory drawings underline the ‘thrownness’ of the artist-researcher—her being-in-the-world—and, as such may, be considered in light of shifting debates surrounding the ethics and politics of social documentary practices.¹⁵⁰

Formally, the drawings that result hesitate between abstraction and figuration. Each is a sparse, yet elegant composition of seemingly errant tracings from which emerge suggestive depictions of faces and objects. The “blind” drawings and the ‘eyes-closed’ memory drawings appear to have all been made with ink. In a 2004 exhibition at Le Quartier, centre d’art contemporain, Quimper (France), the drawings are framed and hung on the wall in tight groupings; the portraits of the nuns are presented above the pictures of objects that they drew. The textual fragments (more on which below) are printed small and presented on the top of waist-high plinths that stand flush against the wall. Placed below and to the right of the image groupings, these texts operate as captions for the drawings. The objects and presentation of *Dévoilements* has a standard aesthetic appeal that de Groot’s works normally do not.

In *Dévoilements*, de Groot adapts the method of “blind” line drawing—a popular way of teaching people how to draw—to capture a trace of the eight sisters’ presence and effort.¹⁵¹ One might suggest that the drawings also act as records (however imprecise) of the ritual objects selected, but the circulation of *Dévoilements* within an

¹⁵⁰ Patrice Loubier refers to de Groot as a “documentarist” in “To Take Place, To Disappear: On Certain Shifts Between Art and Reality,” trans. Jannine Hopkinson, in *Les Commenseaux* (2001), 202.

¹⁵¹ For instance, this mode of “blind” drawing was endorsed by Kimon Nicolaïdes in his influential instruction manual, *The Natural Way to Draw* (1941).

aesthetic, rather than a bureaucratic sphere raises doubts about the existence of such an instrumental function. Nevertheless, “blind” drawing, understood as an action, does have an instrumental function—the activity allows de Groot to develop a rapport with the nuns on an experiential level.

The drawing sessions provide de Groot with the time and the space to ask the women questions, and vice-versa. These recorded conversations, morsels of which appear alongside the drawings in the book and exhibition, touch on the womens’ spiritual trajectory, on how they lived the secularization of Quebec during the 1960s and 70s, on their experience of community, etcetera.¹⁵² The focus of these questions invites a comparison between the sisters’ “blind” drawings and what qualitative social researchers call “memory-,” or “mattering maps”—essentially, sketches made by individuals and groups of places as they remember and/or imagine them. The presence of the texts strengthens the viewer/reader’s awareness of the drawings as records of a life crossed by a multiplicity of social, biological, and historical forces.

For de Groot, the “blind” drawings are like seismographs of seeing (i.e., indexes of presence, records of an encounter) before constituting failed or successful representations.¹⁵³ *Dévoilements* translates literally as ‘unveilings’. It connotes the idea of presencing: the presencing of the sisters; of memory; of a certain kind of truth related

¹⁵² See Raphaëlle de Groot, “L’autre comme contrée à explorer, *Dévoilements* et *Colin-maillard*,” in *Les commensaux, Quand l’art se fait circonstances* edited by Patrice Loubier and Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montreal: Centre des arts actuels Skol, 2001).

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 125. “Avant *Dévoilements*, j’avais déjà dans un de mes projets utilisé le dessin à l’aveugle [*Lectures*, 1998-2000]. J’étais fascinée par l’action de dessiner sans m’ajuster au résultat visuel. Lorsque je trace un sujet ‘à l’aveugle’, je m’efforce de traduire sur papier le mouvement de mes yeux: ma main enregistre mon regard comme un seismographe. ... Elle correspond au trajet de l’oeil.”

to phenomenology (as per Heidegger's *a-letheia*); and of de Groot's and the viewer's encounter with the sisters through the complex documentary fabric of the work.

Executed over a three-year period, *Dévoilements* exists alongside other projects in which de Groot has engaged with groups and individuals that exist beyond the boundaries of the contemporary art world. These groups are also marginal in respect to general social and political norms: blind and partially sighted persons in *Colin-maillard* (1999-2001), home care workers in *Plus que parfaites. Chroniques du travail en maison privée, 1920-2000* (1999-2001), and textile factory workers in *8 x 5 x 363 + 1* (2002-2006). *Dévoilements* overlaps temporally with many of these projects. In *Colin-maillard* specifically, de Groot explores many of the same strategies.

Dévoilements was originally presented at Occurrence, espace d'art et d'essai contemporain in Montreal in 2001.

Exercice filmé 1 (2002)

Video performance (Colour, no sound, 17: 55 minutes.)

Exercice filmé 1 shows, in a single take, a performative action carried out by Raphaëlle de Groot inside a studio. The video opens with a mid-range shot of de Groot, standing behind a working table; she is alone in the room, save for the person holding the camera. It is dark outside. De Groot begins by picking up from the table two large sheets of paper, with which she covers her head, shaping the paper into a large, bulbous form. Her face thus hidden, and her vision blocked, de Groot proceeds to take on a slew of other physical restraints before attempting to perform "a fairly simple task" in front of the camera: to paint a face on the paper covering her head.

De Groot's left side is totally affected by a yellow bucket which, laden with a block of wood, hangs heavily from the crux of her left elbow. This is her drawing arm. De Groot takes a metal, skewer-type thing from the table and covers it with grey plasticine. All the time she is moving about as though the room were completely dark: carefully, by palpatingly. Using rounds and rounds of red tape, de Groot attaches this improvised instrument to her left hand; it will serve her as a brush, but a brush of such weight that it dangles from her wrist and finger, which are barely strong enough to lift it up. As a kind of finishing touch, de Groot motions to the camera-person (Liron Meshulam) to help her tie her other arm to her waist. Encumbered in this way, looking almost monstrous, de Groot has to move her whole body just to dip the rod into the can of black paint she has opened on the table (she misses the can altogether, tries again). She then takes a couple of steps away from the table, tremblingly raises her arm to her face, pauses to take aim, and dabs. The same is repeated until something like a face is marked out. The video ends when de Groot, satisfied with the results of her effort, removes the restraints, leaving the mask for last.

Formally, the video exhibits a blend of planning and spontaneity that is characteristic of much performance documentation. The hand-held shooting, improvised camera movements, and use of the long take format intensify the immediacy of the action. At the same time, signs such as a crumpled piece of paper discarded on the floor, the preparedness of the materials (they appear on or near the table from the beginning), and the actual act of documentation, indicate that this exercise is premeditated and guided by a more extended process of experimentation.

The same blend of planning and spontaneity, preparedness and contingency, can be seen in the materiality of the restraints. For one, the restraints are improvised—fashioned on the spot (in front of the camera) out of ‘poor’ and often brightly coloured materials. And secondly, they seem to be made up of whatever objects were on hand at a given time; the bucket, tape, wood, plasticine, and so forth, are at home in the surrounding studio. In *Exercice filmé 1*, the video apparatus and the material restraints are evocative of the fact that, indeed, “there are countless ways of ‘making do’.”¹⁵⁴

So imposed, the restraints seem to cast de Groot into a state of struggle. When staged in front of a camera, they produce an image of her effort. The restraints also incite de Groot to adapt her habitual movements by forcing her to bend, flex, and draw in unforeseen and unforeseeable ways. The gesture cast her into a state of invention. In the process de Groot appears strange, almost inhuman in her movements (like Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis”). “Troublant pantin géant,” is what Nicole Gingras calls the form that de Groot takes in the video. This mild impression of otherness is enhanced by the paper mask. The artist’s fumbling invokes feelings of empathy (or, more broadly, of identification), but it also establishes a certain distance—the distance of defamiliarization.

Exercice filmé 1 has an affinity with the work of artists who have, since the 1950s and 1960s, used performance and the performance document as alternative sites of experimentation, production, dissemination, and critique. The gesture may also be read as revisiting the history of the errant trace and its representation (from Hans Namuth’s photographs of Pollock painting, on). But we cannot overlook what appears to be the

¹⁵⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29.

main function of the video—namely, to allow de Groot to see and interpret the contents of her action later on. The idea that the video was made, in part, for de Groot’s personal viewing crosses and informs the viewer’s mediated experience of the event. In short, the work’s imagined spectator appears to be split along numerous affective and referential axes.

Anchored to the image and figure of the artist, *Exercice filmé 1* enacts a set of questions that address the unstable ground of artistic intention, the gaze, and visual mastery. De Groot’s inquisitive gesture seems to focus especially on the kind of agency involved in drawing, mark-making and depiction; recorded in a more or less private setting, the gesture cannot help but touch on the dynamics of spectatorship as well. For Nicole Gingras, this video document not only draws attention to the gaze and to the act of portraiture but also appeals to the imagination, inviting spectators to elaborate stories about the action taking place. In its slowness, Gingras adds, the video also gives viewers “un temps pour s’y égarer.”¹⁵⁵

Though created in 2002, *Exercice filmé 1* was first exhibited as part of Nicole Gingras’s collective exhibition *Regarder, observer, surveiller* (Séquence, May 7-August 22, 2004). On this occasion, the work was presented as part of a program of video projections exhibited on the gallery’s front window at night.

Exercice filmé 1 takes on special significance when we consider that it is remade and incorporated as an element in two subsequent installations—*The Making* (2003) and *L’Histoire illustrée* (2003-2004)—which investigate connections between memory, materiality, place, and processes of identification. It is worth noting that, in the

¹⁵⁵ Gingras, *Regarder, Observer, Surveiller* (Chicoutimi: Galerie Séquence, 2004).

performances recorded for these two installations, de Groot makes the restraints more difficult, and ends by tipping a bucket of water mixed with flour over her head—a nod, perhaps, to Jim Dine’s capitulating gesture in his performance *The Smiling Workman* (1960).

Not only is *Exercice filmé 1* remade as a video, it also serves as the model for later and arguably more complex live performances and interventions. *Drawing Lesson*, *En exercice*, and *Portraits de clients* are but three examples. *Exercice filmé 1* shares many formal qualities with the slightly more pared-down, studio-based exercises, *Study 1* (2005), *Study 2* (2005), *Study 3* (2007), and *Study 4* (2007).

Casting (2007-2008)

Installation

Casting is a gallery installation comprising a sound component, a colour video, Polaroid photographs, a series of identification cards, five photographic prints (roughly 28 cm x 43 cm each), and accompanying display furniture—all elements which, excepting the latter, refer to de Groot’s 2007 performance-based intervention *Portraits de clients* (2007). *Casting* was presented in a room bounded by three semi-permanent walls. Presented in contiguous spaces, four of de Groot’s video exercises—*Study 1* (2005), *Study 2* (2005), *Study 3* (2007), and *Study 4* (2007)—served partially as framing devices. The context was a collective exhibition held at the Royal Ontario Museum featuring work by the five regional finalists of the 2008 Sobey Art Award.

Casting hinges on the traces generated during *Portraits de clients*—an exercise that, in its own right, raises questions about the futurity of the trace. This reflexive

gesture, imagined as a creative folding or doubling back upon the trace (akin to Nicolas Bourriaud's "postproduction"), is a manoeuvre first rehearsed by de Groot in *Collecte d'empreintes* and *Lectures* (1998-2000). De Groot's continued return to this gesture is such that Louise Déry has come to call it "the de Groot method." Amongst other things, the method simultaneously mimics and depends upon entrenched museological frameworks that revolve around the collection, interpretation, and display of artifacts.

Casting brings together three types of traces from the past: bureaucratic documents (the *actual* ID cards found on the site, as opposed to the index cards that de Groot used for *Portraits de clients*); visual documents of the intervention *Portraits de clients* (the documentary photographs and video); and objects produced either in the context of *Portraits de clients* (the Polaroids) or made specifically for this installation (the sound track). The Polaroids and the sound track resemble one another in their function as visual and aural "readings" or interpretations of the information that was transposed from the ID cards to the index cards.

The audio track plays continuously on a pair of headphones set upon a plinth near the centre of the space. The recording features a lone female voice reciting a series of names followed by bits of personal information. (Note that the same information is found in the captions of the Polaroid photographs displayed nearby.) The phrasings sound truncated, giving a mechanical, serial ground to an otherwise warm-sounding voice. But the editing effect is so mild as to make one question its existence.

An awkward distance separates the audio from the video. The video, which plays on a loop on a flat screen monitor, is fixed to the wall farthest from the listening station. Slightly edited, and screened without sound, it shows what happens during one of the

drawing sessions in *Portraits de clients*. Like the photographs hung on the wall opposite, the video appears to serve a purely nominal function. It provides a no-frills description of the spatio-temporal situation of the intervention/performance. Yet, if seen while listening to the headphones (a dubious combination), new registers of affect and meaning are introduced which explicitly position the visitor as a co-creator of the work's effects.

Presented without frames, and organized in a series that invites a sequential reading, the photographic prints seem to draw attention to the photographic moment in *Portraits de clients*. The photographer is always behind the picture-taker, looking into the scene of portraiture. Moreover, the five photographs selected for the exhibition focus exclusively on those sessions in which de Groot is visibly posed—or 'cast'—in the image of the absent client. The social, performative, and ritualistic dimension of photographic portraiture is thus emphasized. One of the interesting details about these pictures is that they show how small groups of people got involved in the event.

Close to the photos, forty-four colour Polaroid images (the results!) are displayed in the form of a grid. Like the ID cards displayed on an adjacent table, the Polaroids are shown under a sheet of transparent Plexiglas cut to the size of the table. The gridded presentation format invites comparisons between the two sets of objects; at the same time, the spacing of the grid gives each image room to breathe, and hence to expand in the imagination of the visitor. The gridded display also says, Raphaëlle de Groot did this at least forty-four times, effectively underlining the amplitude, repetitiveness and seriality of the performative exercise.

As the Polaroids show, *Portraits de clients* involves a strong component of make-believe, of acting and directing. In this light, *Casting* invokes the space of the audition. An audition is a contest in which actors put on specific identities. Though they are essentially performative situations, auditions are also understood as a preparatory step, an exercise carried out in anticipation of the ‘real thing’ (the film, the play, etc.). Auditions invoke also a very specific professional setting, familiar to actors and performers most of all. As such, the installation’s title raises questions not only about performative identity, but about work, and about acting and performing in particular—two forms of cultural labour inscribed within historically specific relations of power. *Casting* could also be an oblique reference to Richard Serra’s work by the same title (*Casting*, 1969), which is regarded by some critics as a seminal moment in the history of American post-Minimalism.¹⁵⁶ This double meaning of the installation’s title—oriented, on the one hand toward questions of identity and performativity and, on the other, toward the logic of the museum—brings us closer to an understanding of the implications of de Groot’s reflexive “method.”

The ID cards (the catalysts for *Portraits de clients*) are individually mounted onto pieces of white card, a common archival practice. The surface of each card is covered with a translucent, paper-like sheeting through which the personal information and typography remain legible. Rectangles of various sizes have been delicately cut in the sheeting to frame specific fields of information. Conversely, extra strips (also rectangular) have been added to other fields, effectively barring information. Such

¹⁵⁶ See, for instance, Rosalind Krauss, “*A Voyage on the North Sea:*” *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 29.

careful treatment requires close attention to detail and repetitive, physical labour; this minutious gesture prompts comparisons with such interventions as de Groot's *Collecte de poussière* (2000-2001) and *Microcosme* (2000).

The arrangement of the objects in the space encourages visitors to roam freely and to construct personal, if fragmented, narratives from the various morsels of documentation on display. The piecemeal nature of the material, combined with the absence of any didactic text, ensures that these connections remain fragile and open to interpretation.

A panel of text near the installation gives visitors an introduction to the artist's overall practice.

L'art d'accommoder les restes (2008)

Workshop and installation

L'art d'accommoder les restes refers to a workshop as well as an installation. Devised and directed by de Groot, the workshop involved thirteen fine-arts students from the École supérieure des beaux-arts de Cournouaille (Quimper, France). The installation, by contrast, brings the group's process and aims into the physical and discursive space of the gallery and the museum; the work was presented at Le Quartier, centre d'art contemporain, in Quimper, France.

The workshop takes place in a large, shared studio space. Closed to the public, the workshop functions ideally as a time and a space of learning, experimentation, and practice. Like the performance in *Exercice filmé 1*, it constitutes a 'before-time' grounded in the anticipatory dimension of training, or *dressage*. For the workshop, de

Groot asked each student to bring to the studio the scraps, material residues, and surplus elements related to their work. These things, coded as by-products, were subsequently ‘worked’ by the group in a cycle of what de Groot calls “collective actions.” Thus, the originally-discarded or unused fragments become catalysts for experimentation, enabling the articulation of new creative potentialities immanent to the *petit groupe*. Involving three stages or procedures—“making,” “unmaking,” and “remaking”—these working sessions call to mind Joseph Albers’s influential teaching methods from the early 1960s.

Video and photography are used to record the sessions. Some of the images and footage reappear at Le Quartier alongside the final installation. An analogy can be drawn between the documentary images and the installation that is exhibited as the result of the workshops. De Groot describes the installation at Le Quartier as the “still image of a process where artistic potentialities are expressed without inevitably trying to create an art work.”¹⁵⁷ Without obscuring their many differences, one may say that, as indices of a fluid process, the documentary images and the installation exist in the same representational continuum.

Materially, the installation is a heterogeneous assemblage of unlistable objects and parts of objects roughly organized into two sections. The first is a single organic form constructed in the centre of the space: elements freely and judiciously conjoined first keep close the gallery floor, then rise up to eye-level in a swell of diagonally set wooden planks, cardboard tubing, a small white plinth, string, scraps of metal, and mail, even. Well lit, set off from the wall, and self-contained, the piece has the dignified air

¹⁵⁷ De Groot, “L’art d’accommoder les restes,” Raphaëlle de Groot (artist’s website), accessed September 12, <http://www.raphaelledegroot.net/>.

of an art object. Along one of the walls, a series of equally undefinable and heterogeneous objects have been shelved, piled, bundled, propped, and otherwise arranged against the wall, indicating that an organizational imperative is in place. Pristine in its overall effect, the motley collection on the wall shares with the floor piece a certain dialogue with conventional modes of display.

While references to the Duchampian ready-made are apparent (a sloppily constructed *Bicycle Wheel* stands out), such indicators are dubious at best. The installation is too debauched, too determined by collective decisions, and the project too indifferent to hierarchies of signification, to sustain analyses grounded solely on its art-historical quotations. Flaubert's legacy, at least in the form it has taken in recent critical re-readings of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, would not be out of place in the installation's simulacral staging of an ordered situation.¹⁵⁸ This appears to be one of the principal objectives of *L'art d'accommoder les restes*: to frame, however porously, however flexibly and reflexively, the elaboration of new conditions of creativity in dialogue with an institutional context that continues to be defined by conventional (and especially museological) modes of collection, interpretation and display.

De Groot's continued truck with the grammar of Arte Povera, Nouveau Réalisme, and post-Minimalism is apparent in her description of the working sessions as "a work in progress, as a series of exercises and trials, and as a sort of expanded opened out

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Marie-Josée Jean's discussion of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* in "The System of Allusions," in *Image and Inscription: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Photography*, ed. Robert Bean (Toronto: YYZ Books and Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2005): 36-51.

sculpture.”¹⁵⁹ The neo-avant-garde critique of the autonomous art object is implicit in this approach.

The question of the economic, semantic, and affective value of “leftovers” is raised in the show’s *finissage*, or closing celebration. During this event, visitors were invited to take with them whatever elements of the installation struck their fancy. In this way, the installation (and the project more broadly) attained a new, more distributed form—as fetish, memento, trinket, souvenir. At the same time, it caused the dissolution of the art object, thereby revisiting a set of questions regarding not only materiality and dematerialization of the art object, but its material/immaterial circulation as well. In contrast to the practices of the 1960s, one of the defining characteristics of de Groot’s approach (and of her context-oriented peers) is her incorporation of relational and pedagogical frameworks into her practice. This strategy is implicit in *Dévoilements* (“blind” line drawing is, historically, a method of learning how to draw). And it becomes more explicit in such projects as *Drawing Session* (2004) and *En exercice* (2006), where art students become directly involved.

A colloquial expression, *L’art d’accommoder les restes* translates awkwardly into English as “what to do with leftovers.” While the French-speaking usage appears to be culinary, one also encounters it in discussions pertaining to the museal recycling of cultural materials. *Dechets: L’art d’accommoder les restes* is also the title of a 1984 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Raphaëlle de Groot continues this line of investigation in “Preparing leftovers,” a similar cycle of workshops (without an exhibition/installation component) conducted in

¹⁵⁹ De Groot, “Preparing Leftovers,” Raphaëlle de Groot (artist’s website), accessed September 12, <http://www.raphaeldegroot.net/>.

2008 with students from the Université de Québec à Montréal (May 13-15, 2008) and L'École d'art de la Communauté de l'Agglomération d'Annecy, France (April 1-4, 2008).

L'art d'accommoder les restes was presented on the occasion of de Groot's solo exhibition, *Chantiers*, at Le Quartier, centre d'art contemporain (April 11 to June 8).

The workshops were held from March 17 to 29, 2008. Curated by Dominique Abensour, this exhibition also included a presentation of de Groot's *8 x 5 x 365 + 1*. *L'art d'accommoder les restes* is the subject of a 44-page booklet published by Le Quartier.